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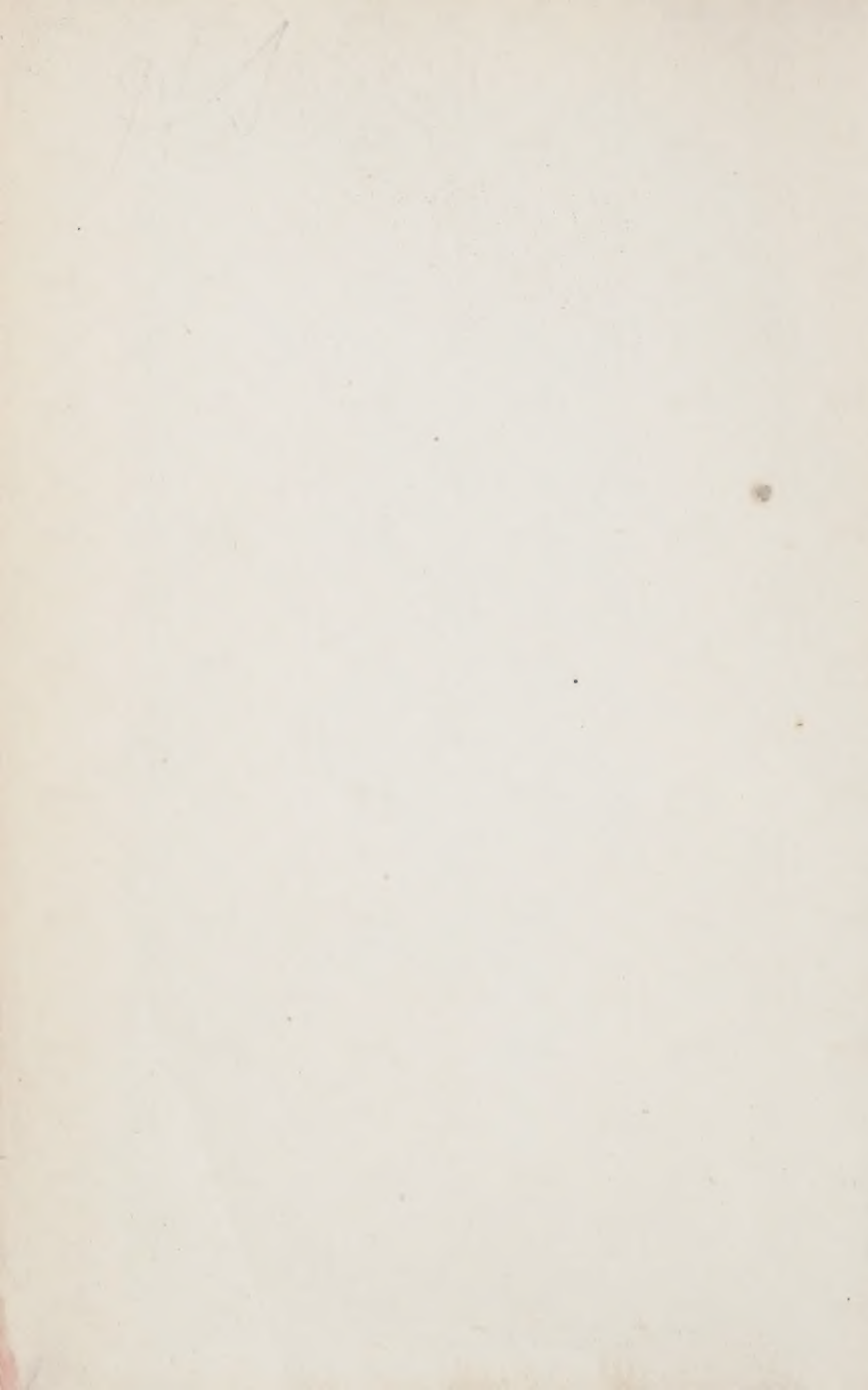
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BID ME GOOD-BYE

BID ME GOOD-BYE

BY
FLORENCE HENNIKER
AUTHOR OF 'SIR GEORGE'

'If we do meet again, why, we shall smile ;
If not, why then, this parting was well made.'
SHAKESPEARE.



LONDON
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON
Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen
1892
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TO
MY BROTHER,
WHO WILL BE
THE MOST KINDLY CRITIC OF MY FIRST
ESSAY IN FICTION,
I DEDICATE THIS STORY.

Aug 10/11



BID ME GOOD-BYE

CHAPTER I.

It was one of those blazing hot summers—which occur but once or twice at most in a decade in our capricious climate—during which we islanders, with our usual inconsistency, spend a large portion of the bright hours in groaning over the heat, pulling down the blinds, and comparing notes with some asperity over the thermometer. We forget how short is their duration, and how soon the splendour of light and shadow which adorns these days, and their sweet

scents of roses and hay, will seem like dreams of a fairer world during the long gray winter of fog and east winds.

The inhabitants of the London courts and alleys were spending all their available time on their doorsteps, apparently unconscious of the fœtid smells under their very noses. Weary-looking women, with white faces, found their poor rags all too sufficient clothing through the suffocating hours, and had hardly energy to swear at the children, with skinny arms and bent legs, who tottered at their feet and rolled in the dust-heaps. At the West-End the water-carts plied from night till morning; perspiring omnibus-horses dragged their loads to Kew Gardens and Hampstead Heath; and the windows of the tall, would-be white houses were a blaze of scarlet geraniums and yellow calceolarias. There were awnings numberless over doors, and tents spreading innumerable in the gardens; strawberries were selling for a

penny a pottle, and fans for a halfpenny, in the streets; and the inhabitants were collecting their remaining energies for the last three weeks of one of the most successful seasons on record.

There was one little person, far away in a stately silent Hampshire country house, who knew only of London seasons, with their successes and heartburnings, their tragedies played out ofttimes under the mask of comedy, their swift - passing dreams and cold awakening to the bitterness of reality, from the duller novels of yester year that duly arrived once a month in the library book-box. To her the summer of 188— had been one dream of delight.

It was glorious indeed, that July in the Hampshire lanes and on the Surrey moorlands! The hedges were a tangle of honeysuckle and wild-roses, the air was full of the tender smell of the clover-fields, and Mary Giffard had but one regret, that the lives of

bird and flower and butterfly must needs be so short, and a half-sigh over her own shortcomings in never for a moment longing (as the Rev. Thomas Smallpiece would have had his congregation long) for the advent of any other life than the one which seemed to her to be paradise itself.

To the outside world (but Mary Giffard knew very little of that) this perfect contentment with her surroundings would have seemed strange enough. They would have seen a young girl growing up month by month, and year by year, in a beautiful but somewhat decaying Elizabethan house, with no habitual companions but a whimsical old uncle and his fidgety, conventional wife, and with no experience of the world beyond an occasional second-rate country ball, or a still rarer expedition to the camp some six miles away. For Mr. John Giffard, for all his own military predilections, had good reasons for not wishing his very charming

niece to cultivate the society of soldiers. But somehow it came about that Mary Giffard, with her perfect physical health, and the unmorbid mind which invariably belongs to such a condition, and her passion for Nature, and pathetic devotion to her lovely old home, was one of the happiest young women who ever lived in the county of Hants, or elsewhere, for the matter of that.

She used to wonder which hour was the most perfectly beautiful. Was it the very early morning, when the thrushes in the lime-trees sang so loud, that she must spring out of bed, and stretch her head far out of the window over the quiet green garden, glittering with dew, and so silent but for the voices of insect or of bird? Or was it the noonday when, under the old *loggia* by the bowling-green, her eyes wandered away over the stretches of park, and beech avenue, and forest, to where the belt of fir-woods stood in black outline against the burning blue?

Or perhaps the moonlight was most lovely of all? When Uncle John was busily employed writing his MS., and Aunt Winifred was threading old postage stamps on a string (for what abstrusely charitable purpose will probably never be known in this world or the next), Mary would wander out alone. First, she would see how grand the house and the terrace and the bowling-green looked in the mysterious white light; then she would go round to the old garden, with its intricate paths and stiff box hedges, and strangely cut yews and hollies, that seemed like dark giants and witches, holding a conclave under the moon.

Sometimes, as she walked down the gravel paths where every pebble shone like a jewel in the strange light, it seemed to her that she was the heroine of a fairy story; a princess in an enchanted castle, waiting for—well, for what she hardly knew, but for something more wonderful and beautiful than anything

she had yet known—something that should transfigure the old house and the silent garden, and, ah! yes, perhaps even the eventless life of Mary Giffard, with a light more glorious than that of sun or of star.

A strange feeling—she did not know whether it was joy, or more like pain—used to come over her in those moments, and a curious sensation of unreality, as if she were living someone else's life in a place, half unknown, half familiar to her. And then, with a little sting of conscience, and a desire to act loyally towards the absent, Mary would sometimes take a letter from her pocket—a letter in a vacillating schoolboy hand—with usually two words out of ten misspelt, and try to fancy that it was of the author of this remarkably dull production that she had been dreaming.

To explain who the writer was, it is necessary to go back a little. The present owner of Brereton Royal, John Giffard, had suc-

ceeded a childless cousin—a typical, narrow-minded, ill-conditioned squire of the old school, whose memory was nevertheless held in mingled awe and admiration by the simple-minded village folk. There had been enough individuality about old Everard Giffard to make up for the lack of it in his wife, Lady Anne; and if he was as loose in morals as he was close about his money, these delinquencies were atoned for in the eyes of his loyal Hampshire tenantry by his fine face and figure, and a certain old-fashioned courtly grace which he could assume, when he chose, after violent explosions of temper, adorned by an extraordinary variety of forcible and profane language. Lady Anne, poor soul! a colourless woman enough, mentally as well as physically, had tried in her feeble way to do good among her neighbours. She went aimlessly to the Sunday-school, but was too shy to criticise anything that she thought amiss in the primitive religious teaching therein

expounded. She sent blankets at Christmas to the old women, and dull books to the children, but somehow she never succeeded in making a real friend of young or old ; and when one hard winter she caught a chill on the lungs during her usual solitary evening walk round the mere, and faded away as silently and quietly as she had lived, she aroused more interest by the pompous funeral arrangements in her honour than she had ever done by her harmless, uncomplaining life. Squire Everard never forgave Lady Anne for having failed to give an heir in the direct line to Brereton Royal, although he was accustomed to remark to her pleasantly at intervals that it was perhaps as well that she had not spoilt the breed of Giffards by introducing her long nose and receding chin into the family ; for if there was one man in the world whom he cordially hated, it was his cousin and heir presumptive—a certain General Giffard—who always alluded to

himself in his letters to the Squire as a 'Christian soldier.' This retired officer was held in high repute as the leader of a select and pious coterie of old ladies and cab-drivers in Brighton, and was the author of two little works, 'That Woman Jezebel' and the 'Face of the Serpent,' which achieved considerable notoriety in that fashionable watering-place.

The pious General had three sons, the elder of whom was the John Giffard who was now the proud possessor of Brereton Royal; the second a sailor, and father of a somewhat idle and foolish young fellow, called Dick. The third was a soldier, who, after making an imprudent love-match, died far away in the burning plains of India, leaving a young wife in the hills destined not long to survive him, and a little girl whose story is here written.

When old Everard Giffard was informed by the celebrated London physician, Sir

Montagu Pillsby, that, humanly speaking, his life was not likely to be much prolonged, he bethought himself in what way he could cause most annoyance to the man who must before long step into his shoes. So the grand old house, with its noble ceilings, and red-brick fretted parapet, and oak panelling, went to the next in tail; and some four thousand a year in ready money was left to a fair-haired girl, with gray eyes, then living in a house in Bayswater with her Uncle John, who was too young to understand what a stroke of good fortune had fallen to her lot.

The old Squire was buried in the family vault at Brereton, and the General from Brighton, and his two sons, and his guide, philosopher, and friend, the Rev. Eli Snuggs, came to the funeral; and the two older men shook their heads over the Squire Everard and his past delinquencies, and the probabilities of his present whereabouts, as they

partook of the baked meats and brown sherry in the hall when the ceremony was over.

The years went on, and the General was gathered to his fathers, and John Giffard reigned in his stead. It would have needed a prince's fortune in these days of agricultural distress to keep up the splendour of the old house as in earlier times.

The gardener found that he and the boys who helped him had almost enough to do to keep the box hedges, and the trees that were cut into all sorts of quaint shapes, and the paths within view of the house, in order. So part of the garden became a lovely tangle of roses and creepers, among the gray urns and moss-grown statues—a sweet sheltered place where

‘There was laughing of old, there was weeping,
Haply of lovers, none ever will know.’

John Giffard would have been weighed down by the difficulties with which by nature

he was utterly unfitted to cope, had it not been for a long-cherished dream which had taken possession of his mind shortly after he had succeeded to Brereton, and the thought of which buoyed him up when the current of daily worries and anxieties threatened to overwhelm him. And at the time when we are about to introduce him to our readers his spirits were at their highest ebb, for the dream had now become a reality. Mary Giffard some two months before had consented to marry her cousin Dick when she should attain her majority at the age of twenty-five. There were three years yet to wait, but it never for an instant entered into the simple old man's head that, during their course, either of the young people would see reason to regret the bond between them made.

Dick was pursuing his studies in London with the aid of the celebrated army coach, Captain Crabbe; and Mary — well, Mary

somehow or other found that his absence did not disturb her very greatly, and that, unlike the young ladies in the novels from London, the advent of the postman with Dick's weekly letter neither caused her the slightest palpitation of the heart, nor deprived her of her usual excellent appetite for breakfast.

Dick was just twenty, a good-looking boy with broad shoulders and dark gray eyes with black lashes — an inheritance of the Giffards of which Fate showed no inclination to deprive them—and a fair moustache which concealed the weakness of the lower part of the face. He thought Mary 'not a bad sort of girl,' but rather behind the times, as regards modern slang and the newest quotations from the songs of the music-halls. He had a kind of fondness (very different, however, from her deep love) for the old home, so he was glad to think that her four thousand a year would give Uncle John's favourite horse, with the aquiline nose, a few thorough-

bred stable companions, and enable him to drink as much champagne as he liked, in lieu of Mr. Giffard's rather sour claret at one-and-nine. Mary had a decided liking for her good-looking cousin, and although they had hardly a taste in common, excepting their love for country pursuits, she vaguely looked forward to a happy future with him, and felt a thrill of joy almost inexpressible when she realized that no farewell need ever now be said to the dear old home. It was pleasant to see, too, how happy Uncle John looked ; he worked at his MS. with redoubled energy, and launched out into the purchase of many yards of galvanized wire for the pheasantries ; and there was often a half-smile on his worn face when he was not speaking. It seemed easier to conciliate the principal tenants, and to hold out hopes of new farm buildings, and improved drainage, in view of Dick's prospective marriage ; and things altogether

were going more smoothly at Brereton Royal than they had done for many a long year.

Mary's betrothal was not, however, announced to the county at large. Mrs. Giffard had a hazy notion that publicly-known long engagements were bad things (the reason of which she could not for the life of her have given; but, then, Mrs. Giffard seldom *did* know the reason of anything). Beyond a few intimate friends of the family, people in general were not aware of the important fact which had lifted such a heavy load of care from Uncle John's shoulders. The Rev. Thomas Smallpiece and his good lady were of course in the secret; but were they not completely identified with the Giffard family? Did not Mrs. Smallpiece know exactly how many pounds of meat came weekly into the house, and why Mary Jane was dismissed without a character, and why Cornelius, the page-boy, was sent for into

Mr. Smallpiece's study to be admonished, besides numberless other interesting facts connected with Brereton Royal and its owners?

Every Sunday afternoon, after the service, the Rev. Thomas used to walk up to the Hall to hear those portions of the MS. of Mr. Giffard's work 'Great Leaders of Men' that had been finished during the past week. Afterwards he and the Squire would spend a good half-hour in discussing various improvements to be effected on the property, unconscious that there was any resemblance between the altar to which Mary was to be led to attain these ends and certain altars of old on which victims, as young and as fair as she, had bought salvation for their fellowmen.

The Squire and the parson were both duly impressed with the importance of the former's great book, which, after many years of labour, had now reached the end of the fourth volume.

‘My dear Squire,’ the Rev. Thomas would say, ‘it is indeed a work which the world will not willingly let die; may you have health and strength to complete it.’

And then the Squire would confide to his friend an idea of a journey to London this autumn, when lodgings should be cheaper, and a series of visits to the British Museum, *in re* the epoch-making volumes.

The great grief of Mr. Giffard’s life had been the persistent refusal of his father, the old Brighton General, to allow him to enter the army. The fact was that the Rev. Eli Snuggs had held forth with such eloquence upon the licentious soldiery, and their probable destiny in the future world, that the old man had thought it advisable to spare his elder son the chance of such a fate, so he sent him instead to the Bar, which he hated, and where history does not relate that he ever obtained a single brief. Poor John was obliged to content himself with the militia,

and later on in life with a Deputy-Lieutenancy for the county ; but it is on record that there was one moment of unmixed joy in his career, when, having made a journey to Paris, he assisted at a Court function at the Tuileries, and was addressed by an agreeable official as 'mon Général,' so striking was the effect of the red uniform and silver epaulettes, to say nothing of the bristly white moustache which he cultivated with assiduous care.

The Giffards had been soldiers for two centuries and more, and there was a goodly assemblage of their portraits in the great library. There was Philip, who fought at Marston Moor with his bridle in his mouth, after a shot had carried his left arm away ; John, who perished in the unfortunate Walcheren Expedition ; Everard, who distinguished himself at Malplaquet ; and another John, who fell on the sea-shore during Abercrombie's desperate fight. There

was also Richard, a boy in the uniform of the Grenadiers, with a singularly pathetic face, who was found yet alive in a ditch, near Waterloo, three days after the battle; George, one of the heroic band of foot-guards, who died at Inkermann after a dozen wounds and more had riddled his body; and, lastly, Mary's father, one of the handsomest of the Giffards, who, no less than they, had perished in the service of the country they had all loved so well, though it was in the deadly Indian climate of the hot plains, and not in stress of fight, that his young life had ebbed away.

Mary had inherited her father's beautiful gray eyes—eyes which contained in their fair depths endless possibilities of pain and passion, and the pathetic expression of which was curiously contradicted by the mouth—a mouth which the old singers would have praised as 'Cupid's bow,' and which seemed made only to smile over the humorous side

of our poor human life. She had a low, white forehead, over which little rings of light brown hair waved ; and the sort of pink in her cheeks which one associates with the wild rose of the hedges, rather than with her more brilliant sister of the garden. Her face was markedly indicative of her character—a character which contained vast capabilities for devotion, and a tenderness of heart and sensitiveness to pain which would have weighed down her young life had these qualities not been lightened by an exceptional sense of humour, and the power of making the best of the world as she found it.

Her room, like her face, gave a good idea of what Mary Giffard was. From its simplicity, no one would have guessed that it belonged to the greatest heiress in that corner of Hampshire. There were no silver brushes or ornaments, no embroideries on the chairs. She had collected from the servants' rooms several curious pieces of oak

furniture, black as the panelling that went half way up the walls; and there was a lovely old chimney-piece jutting out into the room, with two inglenooks and three-cornered seats. Over it was an engraving of her father's picture, and one of Claverhouse, with a beautiful boyish face, and long hair falling on his armour. Opposite there was a picture of the Surrey hounds, and portraits of two or three favourite dogs and horses. Near the window stood a large bird-cage, in which a pair of Canadian blue robins disported themselves; and another in which a bullfinch was singing his plaintive little song.

There were several shelves full of books, old and new. These were principally poetry—and not poetry of the school which one would have expected a young lady brought up in a secluded Hampshire home to affect—Swinburne's 'Atalanta and Calydon,' Rosetti's poems (much *thumbed* and pencil-marked).

and a great treasure, Fitzgerald's 'Omar Khayyàm,' which had been given to her by her one real friend in the neighbourhood, a certain Mr. John Stapleton. But if people would have gathered from this that Mary was at all agnostic in her tendencies, a glance at the ivory crucifix on the wall might have caused them to change their opinion; as also the sight of a fine engraving of St. John the Baptist's head, from the Pitti Palace, which was hanging over her bed, and was likewise a present from the same liberal-minded clergyman who had introduced her to the Persian poet. And the room was one mass of flowers, from the woods and lanes, and the dear old wilderness of a garden: sweet honeysuckle and clover, and tall feathery grass; crimson passion-flowers, and green ferns, and roses without end, blood-red and gold and white.



CHAPTER II.

MR. GIFFARD had invited a few friends to tea, and he and his family were awaiting their arrival under the archways of the *loggia*, out of the reach of the burning July sun.

It was a delightful place to rest in on a summer afternoon. To begin with, it made people feel almost cool to look at the smooth-shaven bowling-green beneath them, half darkened by the shadow of the great yew hedges ; and if their eyes wandered over the stretches of park beyond, everything looked so entirely peaceful and far removed from the turmoil and care of this work-a-day life of ours. The cattle were whisking their tails to keep off the flies under the horse-

chestnuts ; and here and there a rabbit was seen scudding away to his hole, but there was scarcely another sign of life. The red walls of the house, the brilliant border of flowers beneath the windows, the far-reaching avenue, and the broad terraces, seemed to be bathed in a sort of bright, hot haze. It was like being in a world far away from railways and telegrams and society papers, in the good old times of powdered hair and stately curtseys and well-turned compliments, when no one was in a hurry, and when people paid each other sensible long visits of three weeks at a time, and the men drank their two bottles and more of old port, while their wives and sisters made pot-pourri for the blue and white jars on the dark landing, or toiled at the lovely green crewel-work in the old parlour, that still keeps its colour so well, though the white fingers that worked it have been dust and ashes many a year ago.

Mr. Giffard was in high good humour on this particular occasion. The new menagerie was finished, and his friend and neighbour, Mr. Tonge, of Chatell-cum-Jawby, was coming over to-day to inspect it. He had ensconced himself in rather a dark corner of the colonnade, with a table at hand and two new pens, a dragon inkstand, with fresh ink, and several reams of foolscap. Also various cumbrous and moth-eaten volumes of military history, and a biographical dictionary, were beside him. Mrs. Giffard, it was to be hoped, was likewise happy, for *she* had brought out her waste-paper-basket and scissors, and some two thousand and odd old postage stamps (enough, in fact, to keep her quiet till the hoarse-toned bell in the hall should summon the party to dinner at half-past seven). Mary was also fully occupied, but apparently was not altogether satisfied with the work which she had in hand. She, too, had several sheets of paper on her

lap, and a pencil and a dictionary ; for the fact was that she had lately developed a passion for attempting verse translation, and was now grappling, somewhat unsuccessfully, it must be confessed, with a German lyric :

‘ Es war als hat der Himmel
Die Erde still geküsst.’

‘ Oh ! Uncle John, do tell me a rhyme for shimmer.’

‘ My dear Mary, how *can* I concentrate my thoughts on Maurice of Saxe if you will persist in interrupting ?—Potkin !’

This last-named person, the major-domo of the establishment, was at this moment to be observed coming round the corner, bearing a tray of blue and white china teacups and a dish of strawberries. He was an old sergeant-major of a line regiment, and his military bearing and curling moustache were the pride of Uncle John’s life. He was followed by Cornelius, the page, a youth who had a knack of looking rather un-

pleasantly warm even in December, and whose face on this particular July evening might have been mistaken for a danger-signal on the London and South-Western Railway.

‘Potkin,’ continued Uncle John, ‘kindly go into my sitting-room and fetch me “The Soldier’s Pocket-Book,” and “The Operations of War,” and look in the right-hand corner of the left-hand drawer for pages 8, 9, and 10 of vol. iii. of my MS. And, Potkin, if you are sending to Reading to-morrow, tell the shoemaker to do something to Cornelius’s boots before the dinner-party next Friday week; they are the most infernally creaking boots I ever heard!’

At the mention of the word ‘dinner-party,’ there was a slight flutter of excitement visible in the strings of Mrs. Giffard’s cap.

‘Who is coming, Uncle John?’ said Mary, who took a healthy interest in the mildest form of dissipation.

‘Let me see, there are the Smallpieces, and the Sweenys, and young Mr. Whipple.’

‘Mr. and Mrs. Smallpiece!’ This from Potkin, who again appeared round the corner of the terrace, followed by the Rev. Thomas and his lady. Mrs. Smallpiece had on her second-best electric-blue poplin (she had a new one from the distinguished Reading *modiste* every three years), a good many chains and beads, and a pair of gloves with very large gauntlets.

‘Better late than never, dear Mrs. Giffard! You asked us for five, but it is turned fifteen by the stable-clock; but I had to go and see Nelly Cubbidge—poor girl! (I fear she is very unrepentant); and Mrs. Sweeny sent over for the recipe of our home-made ginger-nuts; but here we are at last, and we needn’t hurry away now we’ve got here;’ and Mrs. Smallpiece seated herself near Mrs. Giffard, and produced a basket of perforated card for sticking-plaster cases,

and began snipping away with the greatest possible energy.

Mr. Smallpiece was a great friend, or he might have been more correctly described as a worshipper, of Mary's. In common they possessed the best of all good gifts—a very tender heart, and a large measure of the charity that suffereth long, and is kind; so if one Sunday after another this good old-fashioned divine consigned three-fourths of his congregation to perdition, it is to be presumed that he did so rather from force of habit than from conviction.

Mr. Smallpiece took the deepest interest in Mary's literary efforts; and when some verses of hers appeared a few months back in a side-column of the *Hampshire Herald*, he shed tears over them, and purchased no fewer than three copies of that excellent journal, which he sent respectively to his daughter by his first marriage (now resident at Bangalore), his son in Vancouver Island,

and an old friend and professor at Oxford, for whose critical faculty he entertained a profound veneration.

The *Hampshire Herald* had also printed, by the way, some years before, a series of articles by John Giffard, Esq., entitled, 'A Few Words on Trajectories'; but it is not on record that they have been republished in a cheap or pamphlet form, although it is believed that Mr. Giffard presented a handsomely bound copy to the library at the Staff College.

'Have you been to see poor Nelly?' Mr. Smallpiece inquired of Mary, not without a somewhat nervous glance in the direction of his better half and the perforated cardboard. 'Of course, poor child! she has behaved very badly, and all that; but Mrs. Cubbidge has been very strict with her, and London is very full of temptations for young people. It would be kind of you, dear Mary, if you would try and comfort her a little.'

Mary sighed. She remembered Nelly Cubbidge, a laughing little child, growing up into a pretty, shy girl ; then her departure for the great city, which to the Hampshire villagers was a sort of sink of iniquity ; then vague rumours, and vaguer allusions to a story (common enough, alas !) of sin and poverty and despair. Later on, the home-coming of a broken-down, wasted creature, worn to a shadow with want and disease, longing only for the Death that must soon lay his hand upon her, and the advent of some new life that could hardly be a greater hell than the one that she had already known.

At this point Mary's attention was diverted by the arrival on the terrace of Mr. and Mrs. Tonge, of Chatell-cum-Jawby.

'I suppose,' remarked the new-comer, as he sat down under the shelter of the alcove, 'that you are aware, Giffard, you will shortly have a neighbour at the Grange for the

shooting season? In fact, he was to arrive almost immediately. It appears that Bevan, when he decided upon travelling in Japan, offered the Grange for six months to St. Aubyn—you know who I mean—Sir William——’

Uncle John was all excitement.

‘You don’t mean the man who distinguished himself so much in South Africa?’ he cried.

‘Yes, and in Ashantee,’ put in Mrs. Tonge, who was instantly snubbed by her husband’s observation that ‘it was a new thing for *her* to pose as a chronicler of military exploits.’

Mrs. Tonge was the mildest of woman-kind, and adored Mr. Tonge in spite of the sarcasms which he levelled at her from time to time. Her whole manner gave people to understand that she apologized for having been presumptuous enough to have been born at all, but that, having committed this

indiscretion, she would do her best to conciliate them for the future.

‘Ah!’ observed Mr. Smallpiece thoughtfully, ‘what a great thing is military prowess! We are a little apt, perhaps——’

‘It is the greatest possible piece of luck for us,’ cut in Uncle John, who always interrupted his chaplain when he showed a tendency to become pompous; ‘you remember, I dare say, Mary, my reading to you of the extreme gallantry with which Sir William behaved in South Africa? Let me see, there was something about a hut, and Kaffirs or Zulus, was it?’

Mrs. Tonge meekly suggested ‘Boers,’ and was instantly silenced by a glare from her husband.

‘Yes,’ resumed Uncle John; ‘it may have been either of the three. I can’t quite remember all the details; but St. Aubyn behaved with *extraordinary* heroism. He set his back—or shoulder, was it?—against

the door. There were armed men, you understand, within—or was it that he kicked the door open? Well, whatever it was, he was severely shot through the shoulder.’

‘Lungs,’ corrected Mr. Tonge.

‘Well, lungs; what the devil does it matter which? And then he forced his way in, and fought with extreme heroism. They do say he was found inside smoking his pipe—or cigar, was it?—and there were three—or was it four, Mary, my dear?—dead bodies of Kaffirs——’

‘Zulus,’ suggested Mr. Smallpiece.

‘Boers,’ murmured Mrs. Tonge tentatively.

‘——dead at his feet. Then he was recommended for the V.C.; but by some cursed bit of jobbery——’

‘He is the youngest K.C.B. in the army,’ said Mary, speaking for the first time.

‘Ah!’ said Mr. Tonge thoughtfully; ‘and he is distinguished for *other* things besides military prowess.’

And here the Squire of Chatell-cum-Jawby nodded his head sagaciously, as who should say he could tell a thing or two about Sir William St. Aubyn, if the assembled company liked to hear them.

Mrs. Smallpiece dropped a bit of 'gold-beater's skin,' and became a prey to conflicting feelings. She felt that she simply *must* hear these details concerning the distinguished officer ; but at the same time she was conscious that such information might not be fit for Mary's ears. So, with consummate tact and diplomacy, she observed to the latter :

'It would be very kind of you, Mary my dear, if you would take my scissors and cut a dozen or so of roses for old Mrs. Biffen ; she has got sciatica in her left leg, and can't sleep at nights.'

Mary merely remarked that she would go when the sun was not so blazing hot. So Mrs. Smallpiece (as Mr. Tonge pleasantly

remarked) 'did not get much change out of that young lady.'

Mr. Tonge resumed :

'Of course, there was the famous Murray case ; you remember, Giffard, some years ago, in which he was a co-respondent ? Then there was that affair at Petersburg. If Lord Willborough had not interfered, it might have damaged his prospects a good deal, no doubt of that ! Because in these days, and at headquarters, looseness of morals——'

'My dear Charles,' put in Mrs. Tonge, 'please remember you are *not* in the smoking-room !'

'Will you kindly allow me to get a word in edgeways ?' answered her husband with asperity. 'Well, I was saying, of course, in this latter case, it was better to hush up the affair,' and here Mr. Tonge looked 'unutterable things,' 'because they *do* say she was not the *only*——'

Mary flushed up a good deal, and said she thought it was very ill-natured to rake up things that had happened years ago ; and Mrs. Smallpiece gave a loud cough, which created a diversion, and observed :

‘What a pity it is that Mr. Stapleton should preach such unorthodox doctrine ! Of course, he has a crucifix in the church, and flowers on the altar, and incense, and all that sort of thing ; but then he gets up into the pulpit and says, dear Mrs. Giffard, the *most* extraordinary things about the Athanasian Creed, which he won’t read, for one thing, and I really don’t know what besides ! Why, I ask you ’—and Mrs. Smallpiece held a piece of sticking-plaster aloft—‘why are we to be deprived of our grand old Athanasian Creed, which our fathers——’

‘Did not understand two words of,’ put in Mary, who was rather cross at hearing her friend Mr. Stapleton criticised.

Uncle John, who was getting bored with

the turn the conversation had taken, suggested :

‘ You must come and see my new pheasantry, Tonge ; and I have several rather remarkable additions, by the way, to the menagerie. I have a Cypriote sheep, sent me by General Cuffling. You remember Cuffling ?—the man who was shut up in Lucknow. And—yes, let me see—I don’t think you saw my rare moufflon from Sardinia ? I must say the menagerie is a great interest and pleasure to me !’

And dear old Uncle John led the party down the terrace, past the bowling-green and the trim yew hedges, to where the more neglected part of the garden lay, and the tangled rosary, which went by the name of ‘ Aunt Lettice’s rose-garden,’ after a certain Dame Lettice Giffard, who had planted it when George III. was King.

On one side of this garden, where the broken fountain, with four stone doves bend-

ing over its basin, had long since ceased to play, and where the moss on the face of the sundial rendered it a useless time-keeper, there was a stretch of rough grass, formerly a smooth-shaven lawn, and a long row of what looked like summer-houses, with a little yard surrounded by galvanized wire in front of each hut.

A personage in a blue jersey and shiny cap, such as is affected by the keepers at the Zoological Gardens, was at the door of one of these.

‘Good - evening, Waghorne,’ said Uncle John; ‘I have brought Mr. Tonge to see Lord Beaconsfield.’

This remark might have surprised a passing stranger, but Mr. Tonge was well aware that each animal bore the name of a hero of Mr. Giffard’s; and were not these names duly ticketed on each door, together with that of the native land and the date of admission of the occupant?

‘He do give a lot of trouble, do Lord Beaconsfield,’ remarked Waghorne; and he pointed as he spoke to the Cypriote sheep, who, with his head butted against the wire, was ominously regarding his visitors. ‘I had him out at exercise on Toosday, and he knocked my missus down sixteen times, that he did; and the worst of it is, if he don’t have his outing he won’t take nothink to eat.’

Mr. Tonge here was understood to observe that he rather hoped that Waghorne would not take Lord Beaconsfield out for exercise in the lanes adjoining Chatell-cum-Jawby. Uncle John passed on to the next inhabitant of the menagerie, a rather diseased-looking deer, and in due course the rare moufflon from Sardinia, the marmots, and a scraggy-looking Rhesus monkey came in for their share of the inspection, as also the pheasants and the green doves. Then Mr. and Mrs. Tonge took their departure for Chatell-

cum-Jawby, and Mrs. Smallpiece prevailed on Mary to come home and 'take "pot-luck," my dear. There is only toad-in-the-hole and a grain-pudding; but a good stomach is the best sauce, as the old saying is; and I do like Mr. Smallpiece to have a nice meat meal before he goes to bed.'





CHAPTER III.

A DAY or two after Mr. Giffard's tea-party, Mary obeyed Mr. Smallpiece's behest, and walked down to the village to see the unfortunate Nelly Cubbidge. Old Mrs. Cubbidge was a person of rather superior class and education, and her front parlour contained in consequence more stuffed birds, woollen antimacassars, and coloured engravings of the Royal Family, than any other dwelling of the same calibre in Brereton. Mary passed through this state apartment into a small room which had been given up to the dying girl. Mrs. Cubbidge's idea of sanitation consisted principally in the notion that in all ailments a chill must

be avoided ; so on this particular July afternoon the atmosphere of the little room was oppressively close and stifling. The first sight of the girl's face, as she lay propped up with pillows, cut Mary to the heart. There was the indescribable gray drawn appearance round the mouth that denotes the surely approaching end. The eyes were fixed blankly on the yellow wall in front of them, bare but for the legions of active flies that were buzzing upon it. Her hand, which was almost that of a skeleton already, was plucking aimlessly at the check coverlet. There was not a flower or ornament in the room, and the only book was the family Bible, out of which Mrs. Cubbidge read every evening to her dying grandchild a few of the most condemnatory passages she could discover.

Nelly was better educated than most girls of her class, and had always been a special favourite of Mary's. The first thing that struck people on seeing the two girls

together was the extraordinary likeness in the upper part of their faces. There was the same low forehead and light-brown curly hair; the same dark-gray, wide-apart eyes, with their peculiar pathetic expression; the same short, straight Greek nose. Here the likeness ceased, for there was a coarseness about the lower part of the sick girl's face which was as striking a contrast to Mary's small mouth and slightly prominent chin as the resemblance between the eyes and brow was remarkable.

The likeness was easily to be accounted for; Nelly's mother ('a bad lot, like her daughter after!' as Mrs. Cubbidge pleasantly remarked within earshot of her grandchild) was an illegitimate daughter of old Squire Giffard's, and, happily for her, she had died when her child was born. 'Nelly would never come to no good; it's in the blood,' was another of Mrs. Cubbidge's encouraging observations.

But Mary felt nothing but the deepest, tenderest compassion for the miserable wreck of humanity before her. She sat down by the bed and took Nelly's hand in hers.

‘Have you had anyone to see you the last day or two?’ she asked.

‘Yes, Mrs. Smallpiece, she comes; but she says, “You should mourn for your past sins”; she says, “Prepare to meet thy God!” as if I wasn’t frightened enough already! I don’t know that I’ve been worse really than most girls; it’s all a chance.’

Here there was a violent fit of coughing, which lasted some minutes, and then Mary tenderly wiped the crimson stains off the parched lips.

‘I was deceived, that’s all, and they turned me out! What was I to do, Miss Mary, in London? I did work; but I got so sick and faint; I didn’t have more than one meal a day sometimes.’

Here came another fit of coughing.

‘And all the time I used to hope and hope that *he* would come back! Oh, Miss Mary, don’t *you* ever go and care for anyone as I did for him! He was well off, and used to come to the house where I was; and he asked to paint my picture. I could curse him sometimes! And still I wouldn’t care to go to heaven (Mrs. Smallpiece says there aren’t any sinners there) without—without I knew *he’d* be there!’

Her voice, strained to a half-scream with the effort to speak, and the wild look in her eyes, almost terrified Mary Giffard.

What was it, this mysterious passion that was still burning in the worn-out, wasted frame—stronger than death, more cruel than the grave? What secrets did this poor village girl know, that were as a sealed book to her happier companion? What was this love, for which thousands have sold their hopes of heaven, and to win which for a moment here they would welcome pain and shame unutter-

able? Did it come to all women? Were the rapture and the anguish to be hers, or would she, Mary Giffard, die without having really lived? And as these and other thoughts surged through her brain, somehow or other the vision of Dick's cheerful, common-place, good-looking face rose up before her, and she sighed; she perhaps could not have explained why.

‘Mr. Stapleton has been once,’ continued the dying girl. ‘He says he can’t come often, as it is Mr. Smallpiece’s parish; but *he* is kind—and—he understands—he says we shall be judged according to our temptations, that I am not to be afraid. If I am too tired to pray, he says: “Just you say this, ‘Send out Thy light, and Thy truth; let them lead me.’” Send out Thy light—— Oh! will any light come at last, even to *me*?’

Mary bent down and kissed the white forehead—so cold and damp in the stifling little room.

‘I will come again,’ she said; and she passed through the parlour, with its mahogany furniture and the smiling portrait of the Queen in her youth, out into the pure summer air.

She felt too sad, somehow, to go home at once and listen to Mrs. Giffard’s remarks on which way the wind was, and how odd it is it should be east wind this morning and north-west yesterday evening—and too tired to offer to sit down and write from Uncle John’s dictation. So she turned off into a lane, where a hilly road led by a fir-wood out into the open country, past Farnley Flats, till it brought the traveller to Canford Village. She sat down on a felled tree close to a high honeysuckle hedge, the sweetness of which seemed to fill the whole air.

Mary, who was a great bird-fancier, was watching the graceful movements of a little black-headed titmouse, and wondering what he was hiding in the fir-tree opposite, when

she saw slowly coming towards her up the steep dusty hill a cart, heavily loaded with wood, with a hulking man sitting on the logs. He was belabouring a very small, miserable pony, painfully straining every nerve to drag his burden up the hill. This sight was too much for Mary, who loved all animals, and who had the keenest sympathy for their patient endurance of injury.

She rose, and walked down towards the cart. The poor little animal was very thin, dripping with perspiration, and his weak forelegs looked hardly strong enough to bear his own weight, much less to enable him to drag the heavy cart behind, and the half-drunken brute seated on it.

The man struck the miserable animal a stinging blow over his lean shoulders.

Mary grew crimson, and the tears started to her eyes.

‘How dare you!’ she almost shouted. ‘Don’t you see it is *impossible* for the pony

to drag this weight? Get off, and lead him up.'

For response, the driver, who was three-parts drunk, struck the pony again. Mary seized the reins, and began another remonstrance, whereupon the charioteer broke forth into a volley of choice expletives, and said 'he'd serve her the same if she meddled with him,' and lifted his whip for another blow. The pony made a desperate effort, but his forelegs gave way, and he fell to the ground. More oaths from the driver, who, to Mary's rage and horror, got down from his cart, and struck the prostrate animal over the head.

'You infernal brute! Let go that whip instantly, or I'll give you the biggest thrashing you're ever likely to get!'

Mary turned her head at these words, and saw standing behind her a very tall fair-haired man, dressed in a light shooting-suit and stalking-cap, with a thick walking-stick in his hand, and behind him the most beauti-

ful gold-coloured collie dog that she had ever seen.

‘Take the harness off at once, and help me to get the pony up,’ continued the newcomer in a short, decided voice, which showed he was not accustomed to speak twice if he meant a thing to be done.

The driver swore a little below his breath, but was evidently frightened. The pony was got on to his legs, and he stood shivering all over, a deplorable little object enough. Every bone in his body could be counted, and there was a great sore on his shoulder where the harness had galled him.

The tears ran down Mary’s cheeks.

‘Poor, dear little fellow!’ she said, and patted his rough, damp coat.

Then she turned to his rescuer.

‘I am *so* glad you came!’ she said simply; and the person addressed felt glad of it too, for more reasons than one.

Mary was too much taken up with the

thought of the pony's sufferings to be self-conscious, even if that quality had been characteristic of her, which it certainly was not. So she had no notion how pretty she looked just then. Her simple white dress, with a handkerchief tied over her chest, and her large black straw hat, made her seem like a sweet Romney picture come to life. And the excitement of the little episode had brought the loveliest rose-pink colour into her cheeks, and additional earnestness to the dark-gray eyes.

The stranger turned to the man with the cart.

‘If you think,’ he said, ‘that I am going to allow that pony to drag your infernal heavy cart and your great hulking self up this hill, you’re mistaken. So about the best thing you can do is to walk off to Canford, and beg, borrow, or steal a horse to bring the cart up.’

Here Mary interrupted.

‘Don’t let him have the pony again,’ she entreated; ‘he will be spiteful, and hurt him more. I will buy him, and perhaps he will get better, and be able to work on a farm. What will you sell him for?’—to the driver, who, with lowering face, was looking at the lady and gentleman from under his sullen brows.

The stranger took half a dozen sovereigns out of his pocket.

‘Here,’ he said, ‘the pony’s mine. You know he is only fit to go to the knacker’s, so this is more than he’s worth. And you may thank your lucky stars I didn’t drag you by the scruff of the neck to Canford Police Station. If I catch you thrashing a horse again like that, you won’t be let off so easily.’

So it came about that Mary, leading the pony very tenderly, with her new friend beside, walked slowly and solemnly down the road towards Brereton, as the discomfited

carter made the best of his way to Canford.

‘*How* good of you to buy the pony!’ said Mary. ‘I really don’t know anyone else who would have done it.’

And as she spoke she remembered that on a past occasion she had tried to excite Dick’s sympathy for a poor little ill-used donkey, and how he had said ‘the lower orders always will be brutal, and you only get yourself disliked if you’re eternally meddling.’

And here Mary took a short survey of her quixotic new friend. His appearance was not in any way remarkable, but for his being much taller than the average of men. People would have said at once that he was certainly a gentleman, and as certainly a soldier. He had a very pleasant pair of keen blue eyes, with a good many lines about the corners, and in the rest of the face too; a decidedly aquiline nose, a fair moustache, and short, light hair. They would have guessed that

he had lived about six-and-forty years, and that he had made the most of his time, or, as the French expressively have it, 'Qu'il avait vécu.' And, without doubt, he *had* drained the cup of life to its very dregs—life in the fullest sense, with all its excitements and interests, and vicissitudes of pleasure and pain ; and it was inevitable that his face should be worn and lined, and that, in spite of a spare and active figure, he should look older than his actual age.

‘ I ought to introduce myself formally to you,’ he said, as they walked side by side down the dusty lane. ‘ My name is St. Aubyn, and, as I dare say you know, Bevan, who is a very old friend of mine, has been good enough to let me come and stay at the Grange and have all the shooting while he is in Japan. What a comfortable house it is !’

‘ And my name is Giffard, and I live at Brereton.’

‘Ah! I have often heard of you from Bevan, and I am longing to see your lovely old home. I wonder if I might walk up some evening soon?’

Mary was gazing at her companion with a naïve expression of pleasure and admiration which greatly amused him; for, unknown, of course, to him, visions of his deadly encounters with Zulus, and Kaffirs, and Ashantees were floating before her mind’s eye. And Sir William was thinking of some words of his friend Arthur Bevan: ‘You will go over to Brereton Royal, which I really think is the most heavenly old place in England. And you couldn’t do better, by the way, than to make yourself agreeable to his niece. She is as pretty as they make them, and she will have a lot of money when she comes of age.’

If Sir William St. Aubyn, K.C.B., had chosen his opportunity for finding favour in Miss Giffard’s eyes, he could not have dis-

covered one more excellent than that which Fate had thrown in his path upon this summer afternoon.

They had reached the foot of the hill by this time, and Mary was about to turn off down a short cut which should lead her to Brereton, when her companion stopped her.

‘You look so white and tired after your adventure, Miss Giffard, and we are quite close to the Grange now. Do come in, and let me give you some tea? And when you are a little rested, I shall be proud to have the honour of escorting you home.’

Mary *was* tired, and being a very simple-minded, unconventional young woman, she quite naturally accepted the invitation, and they took the road that led to the Grange.

‘And now I must introduce you to Chevy. Isn’t he a lovely collie? And we are tremendous friends, aren’t we, old boy? We have been in all sorts of curious places

together. haven't we, Chev?—South Africa and Russia, and I don't know where besides.'

Mary stroked the dog's lovely golden ruff, and he wagged his feathery tail with the benignant and patronizing air peculiar to his race.

'Here we are,' said St. Aubyn; 'and now for tea.'

They had arrived at the stables, and a groom ran out, to whom the Colonel handed over the melancholy little pony, and gave directions about him. The man looked rather amused, but, nevertheless, amiable, and Mary felt quite ridiculously happy. This had been a delightful afternoon, and she thought what a charming new friend she had suddenly discovered. For she and St. Aubyn were quite confidential and at home with each other already, far more so than if they had met in a conventional manner in the ordinary course of society.

Mr. Bevan, the owner of the Grange, was a rich bachelor, with a great love of travel ; but, though he was much away from his comfortable home, everything looked bright and luxurious, and in perfect order. The library, into which St. Aubyn led the way, was one of those cheerful, commonplace English country-house rooms which we so often see, looking over a terrace and trim garden. Inside were velvety rugs and tiger-skins, and roomy sofas and armchairs, and all sorts of handsome modern pieces of furniture, and every kind of readable book lying about on the tables.

St. Aubyn drew up a large chair for Mary, and brought a footstool for her, thinking, as he did so, what a charming picture the slender white figure would have made with its background of crimson. Chevy extended himself at her feet, and was graciously pleased to allow his head to be stroked and patted with one hand, while with the other she

turned over the leaves of a tempting little book of Spanish poetry.

St. Aubyn rang for tea, and a very smart soldier-servant, whose clean-shaven face offered a marked contrast to the more ferocious aspect of Potkin and his moustache, brought it in. And Mary, as she ate her strawberries, found out a little more about her new friend. She thought that she had never before met anyone so easy to talk to; and how much charm there was about his sympathetic voice, and the bright smile that lit up the rather worn face. When he laughed, he seemed so heartily amused that his merriment was positively infectious.

‘How long shall you be at the Grange? and will you have many people here for the shooting?’ Mary asked.

‘Well, I am so charmed with the place and its surroundings that I don’t think I shall be much away. I am on leave now, and have had so much work to do lately that I positively

revel in the quiet of the country. I am busy over a *Life of General Lee* just at present, and am glad of this spare time here in which to finish it. I have been so knocked about the world for the last twenty years or more, that you cannot realize what a joy the least approach to a home-life is to me. Dear old Arthur Bevan and I have been friends for ages, and it was always a pet scheme of his that I should come down here some day when he was abroad, but I have never been able to work it until now.'

'I am so glad you have come ; and my uncle John will be quite delighted to see you. He is not a soldier himself, but he has a perfect passion for anything to do with the army ; and he is writing a book—I believe it will be in *ten* volumes when it is done—called "*Great Leaders of Men.*"' (Sir William secretly registered a vow that he would spare himself the perusal of this erudite work.) 'And,' continued Mary, '*I* am very much interested

in soldiers too. I saw Sir Garnet Wolseley once at Aldershot, and Uncle John has been trying to make out that he is some sort of connection of our family. But I lead such a very quiet life that I don't see many remarkable people of any description.'

'Do you know Bevan very well?' asked St. Aubyn. 'You would not have imagined, would you? that he and I would be so very intimate; but we are. And he is the most staunch and loyal friend any man could desire. We are only alike, I think, in one respect—that we are lonely old bachelors, with no one in particular to care for us.'

'*You* are not old,' cried Mary, looking at the tall, active figure and the keen steel-blue eyes.

'Ah well, I am five-and-twenty years older than you, I suppose; and I don't think life has got much more to offer me. But, after all, I can't complain; I have had a very good time of it on the whole, and seen an enormous

amount that is strange and interesting. I sometimes fancy that no novel is a quarter as absorbing as one's own actual life. And I find too, Miss Giffard, that as one gets older, though one may lose the keener pleasures and the "more intense delights, the simple ordinary joys of existence give one a far greater thrill of happiness than they did in early youth. So, you see, old age brings its compensations.'

Mary was turning over the books by her side.

'Do you know,' she said, 'there are no fewer than three—no, four—of my favourite books together on that table! How curious that you and I should like so much the same things—for I see your name on the flyleaf. I know a great deal of "Atalanta in Calydon" by heart, and I am almost as fond of some of Keats.'

'I will lend you any books you care to have,' said St. Aubyn: 'and you can keep

them as long as you like. Well, I don't know that I have anything else very amusing to show you—I don't carry about many photographs; but here is rather a pretty one:' and St. Aubyn exhibited a photograph of a lady in a large silver frame.

Mary took a sudden and quite unaccountable dislike to the lady. She need not have been jealous; for as far as beauty went, she was plain by the side of Mary Giffard's fresh loveliness. But there was a sort of *cachet* about the dress, and the wonderfully arranged fair hair, that irritated our little country friend; and, yes, she certainly *had* a beautiful figure, and an irreproachable neck and shoulders.

'Who is she?' asked Mary.

'She is a great friend of mine, Mrs. Annesley, and a dear little woman. Her husband is Jack Annesley, the man who was in the Blues; and I dare say you know him by name, as a wonderfully fine horseman?

She is a sort of cousin of Bevan's, by the way—and he is very fond of her, too. She is coming to stay with me here to-morrow for some days.'

Mary suddenly felt a curious sense of depression stealing over her, and she realized how very tired she was.

'I must walk home now,' she said; 'Uncle John is by way of dining at half-past seven, which is a bore in summer, but I must be back.'

'It is only just seven. You need not be in such a hurry to go,' said St. Aubyn.

He had the art of throwing a sort of caress into his voice, when he made the simplest remarks, which may have been one reason for the great success which he usually obtained among the opposite sex.

'And I wanted to ask you about a man called Stapleton, a parson, and his sister, who are friends of Bevan's. Is Arthur likely, do you think, to end by marrying

her? He told me once she was the most sensible woman he knew; and another time he solemnly remarked that he didn't believe in love now, but he did in affection, which was a much better thing. All this sounds rather ominous, don't you think so, Miss Giffard?'

Mary said it would be a very good thing for Jane Stapleton. They were very poor, she believed, and gave away every sixpence they had.

And then she rose, saying that she really must go, and St. Aubyn walked with her through the cool, sweet lanes as far as the lodge-gates, where they parted.

'Thank you, Miss Giffard, very much, for the happiest afternoon I have spent for a very long time.'

The gray eyes rested on his for one moment, and her cheeks grew a little rosy.

'Thank you, too,' she said, and passed through the great iron gates under the shadow of the lime-trees.

That evening Mary Giffard's child-like conscience pricked her a little. She had forgotten all about her letter to Dick, which was lying unfinished in the blotting-book. And now she added a postscript :

‘ I went to tea to-day with Sir William St. Aubyn, who has come to live at the Grange for the autumn. People say he is almost the bravest man who ever lived. I believe he was twice recommended for the V.C., and he was so terribly wounded everyone thought he must die. He is very tall, and has fair hair ; but is not exactly handsome—his nose is rather too aquiline—but he has very pleasant manners.’

Dick's answer to this epistle arrived in a few days, and, among other things, contained the following paragraph :

‘ You seem rather gone on that fellow St. Aubyn. But I don't suppose he is beautiful,

with his sandy hair and hooked nose, so I am not jealous. No doubt Uncle John will go on jawing to him all day about the army. I don't think *I* shall pass this time, but I am not going to read six hours a day to please anyone. Crabbe is the most confounded cad I ever met. I have got two AI songs, and am sending them down for you to learn the music. They are encored five times every night. They are called, "I tell you I wasn't born yesterday," and "That evening we went to the Troc." London is beastly at this time of year. I suppose you and Uncle John are coming when everyone else has gone.

'Your affectionate

'DICK.'





CHAPTER IV.

JOHN STAPLETON and his sister were trudging along ankle-deep in dust under a burning sun towards the Grange, the clergyman wishing to leave a card on Mr. Bevan's friend. They had just turned their backs on the front door, and were preparing to walk home, when Stapleton heard a pleasant voice calling to him from the steps, and saw a tall fair man with a collie dog standing close behind him.

‘Do come in and have some coffee,’ said St. Aubyn ; ‘I caught sight of you from the window. We are sitting lazily indoors, after having spent an unconscionable time over luncheon. It is much too hot to walk.’

Jane shook the dust out of her plain alpaca skirt, and followed the two men into the house. She wore a loose gray jacket, which Mr. Dick Giffard would have described as a 'reach-me-down,' and hygienic boots, thereby affording a marked contrast to the fashionable little lady who was sipping coffee in the conservatory.

'May I introduce Mr. and Miss Stapleton, Mrs. Jack?' said Sir William. Mrs. Jack Annesley bowed languidly, and leant her golden head lazily against the back of her rocking-chair. 'And Captain Vernon and Mr. Bradley-Ffolkes?'

Captain Vernon was a popular guardsman, and on the whole the best-dressed man in London. His large white silk tie was so arranged as to be an artistic triumph.

Jane felt uncomfortably out of place among these people, until St. Aubyn set her at her ease by his charming, gracious manner.

'I made a delightful acquaintance a day

or two ago in a romantic way, Miss Stapleton. It was a young lady who knows you very well, with the loveliest gray eyes I ever saw! Can you guess who it was? She rescued a hapless, ill-used pony from his brutal driver, and is going to keep the now fortunate animal as a pet.'

'That must be Mary Giffard,' said Jane, with a smile. 'Isn't she lovely? And so utterly without vanity.'

'I hate women without any vanity,' said Mrs. Annesley, lighting a cigarette, and slowly puffing out the smoke from her red lips. 'And so do all men in their inmost hearts. Don't ask me, Bill, to meet your paragon. Besides, I never know what to say to a girl—particularly a country girl.'

'Let me have a look at her, old fellow,' said Captain Vernon. And Mr. Bradley-Ffolkes said *he* wouldn't care to enter for those stakes, as virgin simplicity wasn't exactly in his line.

A hardly perceptible change had come over John Stapleton's face. No one who did not know him intimately would have noticed it. But he turned the subject of conversation rather abruptly and lamely into an attempt at a discussion on current politics.

'I only read the divorce cases and the police news,' said Mr. Bradley-Ffolkes with a yawn. 'And Charlie just manages to get through the *Bird o' Freedom*. We are not very literary or political here, you see.'

John Stapleton laughed.

'I sometimes have a look at the *Sporting Times* myself,' said he, 'when Bevan is at home. But I don't profess to understand two-thirds of it. I read it on the principle that it is the greatest mistake for a parson to stick only to his own subjects. We can't pitch into people besides, Sir William, if we don't know both sides of a question.'

Captain Charlie Vernon remarked that in

the best sermon he had ever heard, the parson had told them that it was a capital thing, no doubt, to 'put off the old man, but that was no reason why they should put on the old woman.'

Everyone laughed, and presently John and his sister rose to depart, Jane with a decided sense of relief.

'I liked the Colonel,' said she, as they walked slowly homewards, one behind the other, so as to get the benefit of the very little shade that there was; 'but I saw no attraction in Mrs. Annesley. I could not get on with that sort of woman.'

'I am sure there is no harm in her,' said kind John; 'and smoking in these days is no sign of a woman's being fast. She has got a very pretty smile. And I particularly liked that fellow Vernon. In spite of his marvellous get up, and his extraordinary tie, he is the sort of man who would rough it on service with the best of them, and fight

—I was going to say, like the devil, but that's hardly clerical, perhaps !'

They had reached the end of the long broiling road when they met Mr. and Mrs. Smallpiece.

The old clergyman lifted his soft felt hat and mopped his forehead.

'Piph ! what a summer we are having ! Have you been to the Grange ? Mrs. S. and I are going up there now. Is there a smart party ?'

'I saw a rather fast-looking lady out riding yesterday evening with the Colonel,' said the Rector's wife, snapping her jaws as she spoke. 'I hope poor dear Mary won't get into queer company with these people at the Grange. She is stepping up to tea with us presently ; will you join us too, Jane ? *High* tea, you know, just a "dog-in-the-blanket," a bit of cold veal-pie, and warmed-up "bubble and squeak" from yesterday's lunch. But you know what the wise man said, "Better is the

dinner of herbs where love is," and so on ; and in this sweltering weather one's stomach turns against your large hot meat-meals, / say.'

The Stapletons nodded a good-bye to their heated and hospitable friends, and turned into a narrower lane, where some elms threw large patches of shadow over the dusty path. A faint flush of pleasure came over the clergyman's face as he recognised a white figure, a long way off still, wearing a shady hat, and carrying a basket on her arm.

'It is Miss Giffard !' he exclaimed, but his face was quite pale again when his sister turned towards him.

'Well, and where have you been?' said Mary, with a bright smile of welcome to the pair as she drew near.

'To leave a card at the Grange ; and Sir William St. Aubyn saw us, and made us come in.'

There was no doubt about it. Mary

Giffard's face had flushed a vivid crimson, and she had looked quite cool before, under the blazing August sun.

‘Were there—lots of people there?’

‘A Mrs. Annesley—and some men; I was not at all in my element,’ said Jane, looking down at her square dusty feet.

John Stapleton had noticed the rising colour on Mary's face, and promptly averted his eyes, over which a look of sadness had stolen. But he only said, laughingly :

‘The Smallpieces have just gone up there to pay their respects. Our dear Mrs. S. is quite prepared to be shocked at the company, but none the less keen about going.’

‘I always think,’ said Mary, ‘that what would really have suited her would have been to have married Noah, or one of his sons, and to have seen all the other people sinking.’

Mr. Stapleton was a little surprised at her tone, for Mary Giffard was rarely, if ever, bitter in her speech.

‘ I dare say I am rather horrid and spiteful,’ she said, with a half-laugh. And she stopped by a cluster of honeysuckles, and picked a fragrant bunch covered with blossoms. ‘ Look, what a mass of flowers !’ said she, handing it to Mr. Stapleton, who took it from her hand.

And that branch found its way at last, when its sweetness was gone, and its yellow petals withered, into a drawer in Mr. Stapleton’s writing-table, where he kept a few of his most cherished relics.





CHAPTER V.

A FEW days after the adventure with the pony, St. Anbyn started off to pay his first visit to Brereton Royal.

The sun was low in the west when he arrived, and there was scarcely a breath of wind to wave the tall lime-trees in the avenue. He never forgot his first sight of the old house. The front view was impressive enough ; but it was when Potkin had led him through the great hall, and several solemn state-rooms hung with faded green tapestry, out on to the terrace, that he was most overpowered by the beauty and grandeur of the place. The sun was just visible over

the tops of the distant fir-woods, a scarlet 'ball of light.' and there was a most marvellous rose-coloured glow over all things—on the noble red house, with its elaborate fret-work and stately windows; over the masses of creeper that hung on its walls, and from the archways of the alcove; over the white roses and jessamine, turning them into a soft pink; and on the faces of the people who came forward to greet him.

It all seemed like a wonderful dream, some world of enchantment. into which neither pain, nor tears, nor decay could enter. And coming across the bowling-green, with the same tender rosy light shining on her face and her white dress, her arms holding a bunch of dark-red roses and snowy passion-flowers, he saw Mary Giffard. To St. Aubyn's eyes she looked like the princess in the fairy tales of his childhood, around whom all this glory, and light, and splendour centred, waiting for the

prince who must come to claim her, and with her share

‘The full fruition of an unexhausted joy.’

Was he come already?

St. Aubyn was almost surprised at the sharp pang at his heart, and then he smiled bitterly to himself at his folly. What was he—a man the best of whose life was over, his life with its passions, its failures, and its sins—that he should even dream of this beautiful pure child?

Her smile was very sweet as she put her hand into his. And St. Aubyn’s pleasure at seeing her was extremely visible in his blue eyes.

Uncle John was all excitement.

‘We are indeed in luck, Sir William, to have you for so near a neighbour. You must make any use of us you like. I am afraid I haven’t much shooting—only some rabbits; one can’t afford it in these days,’

said poor Uncle John ; ‘but my nephew, when he comes back, will be delighted if you will help him with the rabbits. And perhaps, if a quiet gathering doesn’t bore you, you will join us at my birthday dinner-party next Friday. It will be rather dull, I dare say, after London ; but we have some nice neighbours. I dare say you may have come across Tonge, of Chatell ? He stood once for the county, and knows a great many people. And young Whipple will give us a little music, I’ve no doubt.’

And so the dear old man went rambling on, and finally suggested that Mary should show the Colonel the menagerie. St. Aubyn looked at her with the sort of expression that implied he would have gladly walked all the way to the Zoological Gardens, or anywhere else, with *her*, but Mary put a decided veto on the plan. She was beginning to be a little afraid of boring her new friend, and to feel that a man who had seen and

done all that he had would not care for the simple little pleasures and pastimes that made up her life.

So the party sat on under the arches, and the rosy light grew paler, and the sky changed to opal, and yellow, and violet, as a soft breeze rose up and fanned their faces, and brought them sweet scents from the jessamine on the walls and the briar in the garden below.

A week later Uncle John gathered his friends and neighbours together for the birthday dinner, and St. Aubyn, who had walked over, and was afraid of being late, found himself the first guest to arrive. He had more than once before this evening come across Mary in her long walks since his first visit to Brereton Royal.

It is sad to have to confess it, but dear old Mr. Giffard, who rarely gave any sort of entertainment, was consequently extremely nervous and fidgety on this occasion, and

even the advent of his distinguished neighbour could not check a certain absence of mind visible in his manner, and a decided incoherency in his remarks. He took up a post of vantage near the door, and St. Aubyn seated himself on a sofa by Mary, and obtained from her various items of information about the new arrivals.

An hour or so previously, Uncle John, attended by Potkin, had spent a considerable time in the dining-room, placing and replacing tickets bearing the names of the guests on their respective plates. Mrs. Giffard, who was worse than useless on these occasions, wandered aimlessly in, and remarked that Sir William 'must take her in, of course, as he was a peer's younger son.'

'A peer's son be hanged!' said Uncle John quite fiercely. 'He is a K.C.B. ; and in *my* house, let me tell you, a K.C.B. would take precedence of a Duke.'

At last the thirteen places were satisfac-

torily arranged, and Potkin (whom Uncle John never dared to contradict) carefully closed all the windows, to avoid any guttering over the tablecloth of the shadeless candles thereon.

Then they went upstairs, as wheels were beginning to be heard upon the gravel in the distance.

‘Who is this coming clanking in now?’ St. Aubyn inquired of Mary. ‘I could almost have thought it was the traditional chain-laden ghost, for I suppose you have a ghost?’

‘Oh, that is Mrs. Smallpiece, our Rector’s wife.’

And that estimable lady smilingly advanced. She had on a bran-new dress, of brown satin, adorned with a great deal of what the dressmakers are pleased to call ‘piping,’ in a brilliant shade of lemon colour. A good many strings of amber beads, some Indian jewellery sent over by Mr. Smallpiece’s

daughter from Bangalore, and a fan, safely fastened by a sturdy chain to her waist, were among the other adjuncts of this striking figure. And last, but by no means least, upon her head there waved a yellow plume, which Jemima, the parlourmaid, had been assiduously curling for some hours past over the kitchen fire.

And then arrived Mr. Sweeney, the Duke of Farnborough's agent, and Mrs. Sweeney, who, as the grand-daughter of a baronet, and a member of the 'county families,' gave herself considerable airs; and young Mr. Whipple, who was learning farming with Mr. Sweeney. This last-named gentleman, who was very shy, and pink about the complexion, and wore his fair hair cockatoo-wise, came skating rapidly over the slippery oak boards, and shot past Uncle John's extended hand, only to save a fall by tightly grasping a marble table with uncommonly sharp corners. Then he blushed a deeper shade of crimson,

and deposited a small black bag and a roll of music on the sofa. The idea seemed suddenly to flash across him that he should have left these accompaniments in the hall below. Whereupon he blushed more furiously than before, and his hands grew cold, and unpleasantly clammy to the touch.

Then Mr. and Miss Stapleton were announced, both of them, St. Aubyn thought, certainly of a more interesting type than the guests one usually meets with at a country dinner-party. The clergyman's face was a singularly striking one, grave almost to severity, but with a sweet expression about the mouth when he smiled, and so much fire in the dark eyes that people would have divined that the austere life which he had marked out for himself was not the one for which nature had originally intended him. Jane Stapleton was tall and slender, and rather badly dressed; and looked essentially English, and sensible, and kind,

and her voice and manner were very charming.

‘Arthur might do worse than marry a woman like that,’ thought St. Aubyn ; ‘what a sweet smile she has ! and I dare say a lot of real romance under that calm face.’

And so she had.

Mr. and Mrs. Tonge were the last to arrive, and Mr. Giffard solemnly gave his arm to Mrs. Sweeney, and the company marched in to dinner. Mary had always hitherto found Uncle John’s parties rather amusing than otherwise, and to-night her two special friends Sir William and Mr. Stapleton were present, but she felt too anxious for the success of the entertainment to be really happy or comfortable. She could not help being afraid that St. Aubyn would find the dinner uneatable, the room stuffy, and the company insufferably dull ; but as she watched him from the opposite side of the table, he seemed to be listening

with the deepest interest to Mrs. Giffard's platitudes about the 'fine strawberry year' and 'St. Swithin's Day,' and to be amusing the other people near him with anecdotes and pleasant, easy conversation.

But, alas ! there were destined to be several mishaps at poor Uncle John's birthday-party. He had scarcely seated Mrs. Sweeney (whose appearance, by the way, gave unmistakable evidence that there was at present no fear of the house of Sweeney becoming extinct), at his right hand, when she was observed to be getting rather red in the face, and to be nervously counting her fellow-guests on her fingers.

'I can't dine thirteen !' suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Sweeney, with a little scream ; 'after what the Duchess told me last week—you remember, Theophilus ?—it is quite impossible. I must leave the table ! Oh ! don't let me make a disturbance ; I really don't want *any* dinner after the shock. Perhaps Mrs.

Giffard would send me in a cup of coffee ? It is no use your looking angry, Theophilus ; it wouldn't be fair to you or me, or any of us, if I remained !' And Mrs. Sweeney rose with dignity, assisted by Potkin (whose moustache looked positively ferocious) and Waghorne, who, in an old evening suit of Uncle John's, some three sizes too big for him, had come in to wait.

Then Mr. Whipple shyly rose, and said, if they pleased, he would have his dinner at the side-table, and Mrs. Sweeney, pacified, sat down again.

Mary saw an intensely amused expression on St. Aubyn's face, as she caught his eye ; but the next moment she became aware that, though the Reading shoemaker had been successful in rendering fairly noiseless the boots of Cornelius, the page, the haberdasher of that borough had apparently not been as much so concerning the size of his white cotton gloves ; and Mary saw him, between

the courses, vainly trying to ram down the hapless long fingers. Potkin, who enjoyed a dinner-party vastly, was in all his glory, and filled up the champagne-glasses so often that there was soon quite a pleasant buzz of conversation. Waghorne, on the other hand, was not so much at his ease, and from time to time fixed a nervous and deprecating eye upon his superior; and the temperature of the room having now become almost tropical, people experienced an uncomfortable sensation at his approach, as though the Cypriote sheep had been numbered among the guests.

Mrs. Giffard was a complete cipher as regards household matters, so the whole arrangement of the culinary portion of Uncle John's birthday entertainment had devolved upon Mrs. Pinion, the cook. That good woman (having lately received a large supply of curry from the co-operative stores) had treated the party upon this particularly warm

July evening to a strong Mulligatawny soup. Mary saw the Colonel bravely tackling it, and his courage apparently giving way after the first few spoonfuls. Old Mr. Smallpiece, on the other hand, who always thought everything was of the very best at Brereton Royal, sent for a second help, which led his wife to remark audibly that 'she was afraid he would remember his dinner next day!'

But, alas! the misfortunes at this birthday banquet were by no means at an end. After fish and *anges à cheval*—which Mrs. Pinion, by a curious freak of fancy, *would* send in as an *entrée*—there was a long pause before the *pièce-de-résistance* (which the bill of fare announced as sirloin of beef) made its appearance. The conversation was beginning to flag, from a general sense of expectancy, when there was audible—behind the door—a prolonged scuffling noise, and a loud altercation between Potkin and Waghorne. The door opened, and through its portals the

sirloin, which had in the most provoking manner slipped off its dish, slid in unattended, on the oak floor, to the horror and dismay of poor Uncle John. Mary felt so sorry for *him* that she almost forbore to laugh; but the sight of St. Aubyn, vainly trying to compose his countenance, was too much for her, and she was obliged to give way at last. This adventure with the beef was the more unfortunate as the duck which followed was apparently a contemporary of the celebrated bird that Charles Lamb once proposed to 'lead home.'

Mr. Tonge, who had had no dinner to speak of, was rapidly becoming cross. He took a sarcastic view of Mrs. Tonge, who, in a new dress, was meekly sitting opposite to him and Mary.

'It is the first time I have ever seen Mrs. Tonge in such a curiously *decolletée* state—quite a case of "low and behold," ain't it?' he remarked.

And the poor lady, who had no notion that she was more unclothed than the custom of society allowed, relapsed into profound silence and dejection of mind. And so, as they drove home to Chatell-cum-Jawby, Mr. Tonge observed still more pleasantly 'that when she sat staring, and saying nothing, with her mouth (which was by no means a small one) wide open, he always felt inclined to get up and post a book in it.'

Mrs. Sweeney, who after two glasses of champagne had quite recovered her usual spirits, now held forth to Uncle John upon the beauties of nature in general, and botany in particular, and Mary heard her eloquently remark :

'What a good friend to us, dear Mr. Giffard, is the fern ! How green and fresh in summer, how brown and warm in winter !'

'Talking of ferns,' cut in Mr. Smallpiece, 'reminds me of watercresses. I don't know if I ever told you a remarkable thing that

happened to one of my parishioners, a most respectable woman.'

Mr. Smallpiece always became prolix when he talked upon medical subjects, and this anecdote of the lady who swallowed not only a watercress, but some curious insects on it, with the strange results thereof, was a very favourite one of his.

Mary saw that St. Aubyn at last was getting tired and bored, and her heart rejoiced greatly when, the populous Gorgonzola having been loosed and recaptured, the moment arrived for the withdrawal, according to the good old English custom, of the cloth from the shining mahogany table. But it sank again as her neighbour, Mr. Tonge, pompously and loudly tapped the board with his knife.

Mr. Sweeney, who was in the middle of a dissertation on chemical manures, looked decidedly cross; but Mr. Tonge rose and addressed the company:

‘Ladies and gentlemen,—It would ill become us, who have just partaken of the generous hospitality of our old and respected friend, Mr. Giffard, to leave his festive board without drinking a bumper to his honour. Allow me to propose the health of our dear and worthy neighbour, Squire Giffard, of Brereton Royal. Musical honours, I think, gentlemen? Perhaps Mr. Whipple will kindly start us?’

And Mr. Whipple, in a hoarse voice, from his far-off side-table, broke forth into ‘He’s a jolly good fellow!’ and Mrs. Smallpiece took up the chorus in a totally different key.

Dear old Uncle John’s hand shook, and his voice trembled as he rose to reply :

‘Ladies and gentlemen,—It is impossible for me to say how much touched——’

But the wit and wisdom of Mr. Giffard was not on this occasion destined to be placed on record for his posterity, for that boy Cornelius, who was gaping in the doorway,

let fall with a mighty crash a large portion of the very best Worcester dessert service, and there was a universal confusion, and rising from chairs, and finally the ladies departed to the drawing-rooms—poor Mary with a flushed face and disturbed mind.

She felt this evening as if it were simply impossible for her to take her share in the conversation, or listen to Mrs. Smallpiece's wise saws and Mrs. Sweeney's eloquent sentences; so, though she really liked Jane Stapleton, she walked off to a far corner of the room, where the sweet-toned old piano stood, and began singing.

Before long, as she expected, she heard St. Aubyn's voice at her side.

‘I thought we were never going to leave the dining-room,’ he said. ‘And do you know, Miss Giffard, that I am quite posted up now in chemical manures, and that I can tell you about most of the complicated diseases of Mr. Smallpiece's flock?’

Mary laughed her old sunny laugh.

‘Sing something to *me*,’ said St. Aubyn.
with a little stress on the ‘*me*.’

And Mary sang by heart, in a fresh young voice that bore more resemblance to a boy’s liquid tones than to the maturer ones of a woman, one of the saddest and sweetest ballads ever written :

‘ Let time and chance combine, combine,
Let time and chance combine ;
That fairest love, from heaven above,
That love of yours was mine, my dear,
That love of yours was mine !’

Truly the stern old Scotch philosopher must have been in singularly tender mood when he uttered those verses.

In the early morning hours, when St. Aubyn was still sitting up writing letters in the smoking-room at the Grange, the words went on echoing in his ears, and before his eyes there floated the vision of a graceful head, thrown a little backward, parted red lips, and pathetic gray eyes.

‘And now,’ said Mrs. Giffard, feeling quite proud of herself for making the suggestion, ‘I dare say Mr. Whipple will kindly give us a little music?’

Mr. Whipple became absolutely purple; but he meekly fetched his well-worn black bag, and produced an ocarina, on which instrument he plaintively whistled ‘My lodging is on the cold ground,’ and other popular airs.

‘I wish he was buried deep under it,’ said St. Aubyn rather savagely, for he was longing for an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête* with Mary.

Mr. Whipple went steadily on through what his admirers termed his ‘sweet and feeling’ repertoire, and at last wiped his perspiring brow with a sigh of relief.

Here Mr. Tonge remarked that he hoped Mrs. Tonge would spare them *her* favourite song about ‘Meet me by moonlight alone,’ as, though there certainly was a moon, he

fancied she'd have to wait a considerable time before anyone joined her.

Mr. Whipple, however, was not to be let off yet.

'I dare say,' said Mrs. Sweeney, with a beaming smile, 'you didn't know that Mr. Whipple was a conjurer? Oh yes! *and* a ventriloquist. Do, please, Mr. Whipple, show Mr. Giffard *how* funnily you can ventriloquize! I tell him he would make his fortune at the Polytechnic!'

And Mr. Whipple, who, though so painfully shy, had a sort of conscientious idea that he must pay for his salt, began the following side-splitting dialogue between himself and an imaginary friend up the chimney:

'How did you get up there?' 'Wouldn't you just like to know!' 'Come down, you old fool!' 'You're another!' and so on.

'Let us go out for a little stroll on the

terrace,' said St. Aubyn, in a low voice to Mary. 'Fate was very cruel in keeping us so far apart at dinner. I have not had a word with you yet.'

Mary's foolish little heart was giving quick thumps against her chest.

'I was very sorry, too, that I couldn't sit by you. There are so many things I want to ask you about.'

And the end of it was that the pair did go out on to the terrace, which looked as bright as daylight under the moon. It was a wonderful night, soft and warm—a night full of sweet scents of flowers; and the moon had transformed the landscape with her tender touch into a mysterious silver world.

'How strange and unreal it all looks!' said St. Aubyn. 'And yet it seems, somehow, as if this world of romance and beauty belongs much more to you and me than the one of glaring lights, and noise, and chatter that we have just left. Don't you think we are nearer

to one another here alone, on this lovely silver terrace, than we were in that hot room surrounded by people with whom we have nothing in common ?’

Mary was startled by a tenderness in his voice that she had never before noticed ; she felt almost frightened, and yet it gave her a great thrill of happiness.

‘ I think, if one likes people, one always has the feeling one would wish to talk to them alone,’ she said simply.

‘ I felt we were going to be friends directly I saw you,’ he answered. ‘ There was something in the expression of your face and the sound of your voice which told me we were in sympathy. And I have only now a great feeling of sadness at my heart when I tell myself that it cannot last—a friendship between you, in your youth and freshness, and me, with my wasted life and disappointed hopes, and the belief in romance long since crushed out of me : how can it ?’

‘Oh, why—why not?’ and her face looked scared and white under the moonlight.

‘Well, don’t let us think of the future. I have been happier since I met you than I have been for—twenty years.’

His eyes wandered beyond Mary’s white figure far over the park and the woods, over the clearly-cut black shadows and the brilliant patches of light. And she saw that he was thinking of someone or something farther off still.

‘Do you know,’ he said, ‘that I feel a sort of impulse now, in this curious unreal hour, to tell you something about my past life? Heaven knows, I have done but little that is good in it, hardly an unselfish or a noble action to counteract a long list of follies and sins; but because you have been so kind to me, because you are so good and pure, and chiefly because my meeting with you may be perhaps the reward of a great sacrifice and a bitter pain, I tell you of *one* thing of

which I am *not* ashamed. I have often thought what nonsense the good people of this world talk—about “virtue being its own reward,” “the recompense of self-sacrifice,” and so on. For *I* never saw any—till I met you, and felt that you were, perhaps, not quite indifferent to me.’

He had drawn a little nearer to her as he spoke.

‘You look like the statue of Galatea when she came to life,’ he said. Mary smiled, and fixed her pure, sad eyes on his face. He continued, ‘Well, twenty years ago I was very fond of a married woman, whose husband had, from unavoidable circumstances, to be almost always abroad. I don’t think I need tell you that *he* was not a friend of mine, otherwise a sense of loyalty would have prevented my becoming so intimate with his wife. Well, we were always together, she and I, one in all our thoughts, and pursuits, and tastes, and I verily believe

that our love approached to the nearest ideal of what such a love could be. This went on for two or three years, but I had too much regard for her to do anything that might compromise her publicly. One day—ah, *how* well I remember that evening!—the news came that her husband would unexpectedly return. She told me she *could* not go back to him, and said—well, you can imagine the sort of things; but I would have shot myself rather than disgrace her in the eyes of the world. I tore myself away, and the next day wrote her a cruel, harsh letter (with my heart in utter despair all the time), saying that she must *not* follow me, that I had been mistaken in the nature of my affection for her, and so on. It was a lie, of course, but it saved her. She went back to her husband, and the world never knew our story; and I—I let her believe afterwards that I was in love with another woman, so that she might hate me; though

God knows a love like that does not often come to a man twice.'

'Where is she now?' asked Mary, with pale lips and tears filling her eyes.

'She is dead,' he answered.

And there was a long silence, broken only by the distant chirp of the grasshoppers, and the booming of some night insect that brushed by. The clouds were gathering over the moon, and their black shadows fell upon the two silent figures.

'Does one never love again after a love like that?' asked Mary Giffard.

He took both her hands in his.

'I should have said "no" if anyone had asked me that question a fortnight ago,' he answered. 'But I am not quite so sure of it now!'

The dark clouds were drifting away from the moon's face, and once more she shone out in her unveiled glory. A silvery shaft of light fell upon Mary Giffard, turning her

simple white dress into a fairy robe of sheeny texture, and shedding its soft beam upon her upturned face as she smiled through her tears.

And in the little wood below the terrace a nightingale suddenly burst forth into a rapture of passionate song.





CHAPTER VI.

ON the afternoon after the dinner-party, under the pretext of bringing a military book for Uncle John, and one of a lighter description for Mary, St. Aubyn again walked up to Brereton Royal. She could not help feeling secretly a little disappointed at his easy unconstrained greeting. He seemed entirely to have forgotten their half-hour on the moonlit terrace, and to have determined to assume towards her nothing beyond the friendly bearing of an intimate acquaintance.

Mary tried to assure herself that it was really better that it should be so, for during the past night she had been undergoing a

rather severe mental struggle. It had flashed across her, as she sat by her open window until the dawn awoke, and shone pink and iridescent over the sleeping garden, that she had not been quite honest either towards her new friend or towards her plighted husband, Cousin Dick. She had tried at first to stifle her conscience by saying to herself that, as her aunt and uncle did not wish the engagement to be announced, she was only right in keeping St. Aubyn in the dark as to this fact, and then to persuade herself that he and she might yet be friends—yes, very dear friends, always, both now and in the far future when she should be married. But somehow she could not feel really happy.

However, when the cold hours of the early dawn were past—those silent hours in which a train of melancholy thoughts is so apt to take possession of our minds as we lie awake—and the sun rose glorious over park and woodland, Mary regained something of her

usual lightness of heart, and found herself restlessly wondering when she would again see St. Aubyn.

So she sat at the window of Uncle John's little sitting-room that afternoon, making vain efforts to concentrate her thoughts on the copying of an MS. of Mr. Giffard's, and writing, if the truth must be told, the most extraordinary gibberish at times. Her eyes were always wandering out of this window, which looked over the approach to the front door.

Presently she observed Waghorne slowly walking by on the gravel, and leading the Cypriote sheep by a strong rope. Lord Beaconsfield appeared to be in a refractory humour. He kept bobbing, as he usually did, his head up and down, and making little springs forward, and attempts to free himself from thralldom. Mary divined from the expression of Waghorne's face that the keeper was making use of some rather strong ex-

pressions just then ; and suddenly who should come round the corner but old Mr. Smallpiece, with a parcel under his arm ! and Mary almost laughed aloud at his evident consternation at this meeting with Waghorne and his charge, and the hurried manner in which he cut round to the side-door to escape them. A little later on, Mary saw three maids going out for an airing in their best bonnets, and was amused at their suddenly backing into the wood to avoid Mrs. Smallpiece, who was walking up from the village, and would doubtless have taken this opportunity of administering a little good advice to them. Then Uncle John came out for his daily constitutional, and visit to the menagerie ; and at *last*, walking quickly towards the house, in a suit of dark-blue serge, with Chevy racing round and round in front of him, came Sir William St. Aubyn. He rang the great bell at the front door, and Mary dropped a very huge blot of ink right in the

middle of page 1563 of 'Great Leaders of Men.'

And during the ensuing ten days he often came again. Hypocrisy was certainly not one of Sir William's vices, but at this time he certainly feigned, well, a *little* more interest than he actually felt in Mr. Giffard's formidable book. He even gave advice as to the altering of certain passages, and the addition of others; so that Uncle John, in great delight, remarked one morning to his niece:

'Really, Mary, my dear, you can't imagine how valuable Sir William's assistance has been to me! I almost think that it would be only good taste to give some acknowledgment of it in the preface. Wouldn't you say so?'

It soon became a recognised thing that St. Aubyn should walk up to Brereton for an early tea, and that he and Mary should go out together, now and then, to sit under the

cedars on the eastern side of the house, when he would read to her some of his favourite passages of poetry, delighting, as he did so, in her fresh enthusiasm and her keen perception of beauty. Often they took long rambling walks through the green brake fern, growing shoulder-high in the park, or in the solitary woodland paths, where the fir-trees reared their heads above patches of brilliant violet heather. It never struck poor Uncle John that there was any risk in allowing this intimacy between these two. Had St. Aubyn been a younger man, it might possibly have occurred to him that it was unwise to leave them so much alone; but he regarded this distinguished soldier as entirely his own friend and contemporary, and he was, moreover, fully impressed with the idea that Mary was too much in love with Dick ever to give a serious thought to anyone but him.

Mr. Potkin, however, was considerably more shrewd than his master.

‘I’ve a hidea,’ he remarked to Mrs. Pinion, the housekeeper, one evening after supper, ‘that we’ve ‘ad enough of all this phi-lander-ing hout, and carryin’ on between Miss Mary and that St. Hawbin. Hanyone to look at ‘im, Mrs. Pinion, can tell that he ain’t a marryin’ man.’

And Mrs. Pinion replied that ‘she didn’t ‘old with that sort of thing for her part; and that it was quite time Master Richard came ‘ome.’

St. Aubyn was getting to know every corner and room in the old house as well as did Mary herself. One especially lovely evening, towards sunset, she took him up into the oak-panelled parlour that opens out of the chapel, and they stood for a long time watching the changing brilliancy of the sky, and admiring the grandeur of the stately double avenue of oak and elm of a mile or more long, that stretches up the hill as far as eye can reach.

‘I don’t think I ever saw a place as beautiful altogether as this,’ said St. Aubyn. ‘One never hardly meets with such a house, and such trees, and woods and park, all together. I have seen most of our fine Elizabethan and Jacobean places—Hatfield, Bramshill, Crewe, and Longleat, and a good many others too, but this is the best of all. I feel like the Queen of Sheba—“the half of it was not told me”—and to me it is ever so much more pathetic and lovely because the inside and the furniture *are* a little faded and worn. It would entirely spoil the house if a millionaire laid his finger on it, and “did it up.” It is perfect.’

Mary showed him the beautiful green crewel-work on the stiff old chairs with projecting ears, and on the straight-backed sofas.

‘They say some of this work was done by Lady Giffard,’ she said. ‘She is the lady with the pretty sad eyes whose picture is

over the dining-room fireplace. There is such a lovely road in the woods, called after her, Lady Giffard's Ride. I must take you there one of these days.'

Presently St. Aubyn became enthusiastic over the pattern of the ceiling, and the frieze below it.

'I must make a little sketch of it,' he said.

'Do you draw, too?' said Mary. 'It seems to me there is nothing you can't do. And I feel so dreadfully ignorant when I am with you. Dear old Uncle John let me have one or two masters from Reading; but it was so expensive, and I never had a good governess.'

'I don't see how your friends could wish for the smallest change in you,' he said, with the caressing tone in his voice that made Mary's heart go quicker.

'I will show you the chapel before it gets darker,' was the only answer she vouchsafed to this flattering remark, and they passed

through two heavy oak doors into this place of worship, which, owing to Uncle John's Low Church prejudices, was curiously unworthy of the rest of the house. Twice a week in the mornings, and on Sunday afternoons, Mr. Smallpiece gave a short service for the servants. On the last-named occasions the congregation were favoured with a sermon.

'One knows them all so well,' said Mary; 'there are, let me see, two about Ahab, and several about Balaam, and one about the Ark and its contents, so I am afraid we don't listen as we ought to do. Look at Uncle John's window that he put up to his father's memory.'

St. Aubyn contemplated in silence a figure of St. George, dressed in a very gaudy costume of many colours, with his foot upon a dragon's head. As it is believed that this warrior of Brighton had never seen a shot fired, much less a real live dragon, the subject

of the memorial was not specially appropriate.

A few days afterwards, when St. Aubyn was reading to Mary under the cedar-trees, Potkin advanced towards them with an important air and informed them that the coach of the —th Lancers, 'with no hend of hawfficers on it,' had driven over from the camp, and that Mr. Giffard, who was tired, wished Miss Mary to show them the house.

'What an *intense* bore!' said Mary. 'Now we shan't get our walk round the mere, and down Lady Giffard's drive. It is maddening, their coming over to-day.'

St. Aubyn smiled.

'Many young ladies,' said he, 'would think it rather fun to "personally conduct" a dozen smart young men round the house.'

'But *I* don't—I don't wish to see young men.'

And she and St. Aubyn followed Potkin into the house.

They found in the library, standing about rather aimlessly and shyly, nine or ten men in smart shooting-clothes of various patterns, and all possessing very sunburnt faces and large moustaches. The Colonel, who piqued himself on a knowledge of antiquities, expressed great delight when Mary volunteered to 'show them everything before tea'; so, followed by this troop of rather silent and embarrassed warriors, she began her part of cicerone. One of them, a good-looking boy, with an unmistakable air of the sportsman and smart cavalry soldier, exclaimed in a tone of intense surprise on seeing St. Aubyn :

'You here, Bill? Well, this is the very last place where I should have thought of finding you!'

And then he glanced towards Mary, as the idea flashed across his intelligent young mind that this young lady might have something to do with accounting for 'Bill's' whereabouts.

‘ I must introduce my nephew, Lord Castleford, Miss Giffard,’ said St. Aubyn. ‘ He is not quite such an authority on pictures and antiquities as he is on horses, but he is not a bad fellow when you know him.’

Castleford laughed, a hearty, loud laugh, as, indeed, he usually did at every remark that anybody was pleased to make. He had been just a little bored and shy at the idea of going over to Brereton Royal, but was at last induced to do so when his Colonel said that he should drive the coach back ; and now that he saw Mary, whom he thought the very prettiest girl ‘ you could meet in a day’s walk,’ he was not at all sorry that they had come.

Mary conscientiously took the party all round the rooms, and showed off the ceilings and the tapestry, and the state-bed where James I. had slept, and, as she was a very well-mannered young woman, forebore even

to smile at the curious historical mistakes as to dates, etc., made by the Colonel, or the somewhat crude criticisms on the family portraits hazarded by one or two of his subalterns.

Castleford, who was very much accustomed to be made up to by the fair sex, was just a little piqued by Mary's complete indifference to his presence, and thought to himself that it was rather selfish of 'old Bill,' who had had so many successes in life already, if he were trying to 'make the running' with this lovely Miss Giffard, and he was more silent during the drive home to the camp than he was accustomed to be. That night he settled with himself that it would be only civil to ride over and call at Brereton in a day or two, as the young lady had taken so much trouble to show them her home.

When the sound of the wheels of the coach of that very crack regiment, the —th Lancers,

had died away in the distance, Mary gave a deep sigh of relief.

‘I am *so* glad they are gone,’ said she to St. Aubyn; ‘but it is too late now for Lady Giffard’s Ride.’

‘How unlike most girls you are! It is too dear and kind of you to prefer, as you say you do, the society of a battered old soldier like me to that of all those good-looking young men, whom you might have at your feet if you wished.’

She laughed.

‘I don’t think anyone would recognise you by that description,’ she said. ‘Isn’t it only natural that *any* woman, who is not an absolute idiot, should prefer talking to *you*, who have seen and done so many wonderful things, to listening to those boys?’

‘Ah,’ and his smile had almost more of sadness in it than amusement, ‘I assure you that dozens of young women would give a good deal to bowl over my nephew, Castle-

ford, as you obviously did to-day. For, besides being a really capital boy, he will have a *bonâ-fide* hundred thousand a year some day, and a deer-forest, and a great London house, and all sorts of other things. There will be no end of heart-burnings when he *does* marry !'

'Well, it won't matter to me,' said Mary, and she blushed crimson as she met St. Aubyn's eyes, which were fixed on her with a very earnest and sad expression.

They neither of them ever forgot the day when they at last accomplished the long-contemplated walk to Lady Giffard's Ride. They went first across a stretch of park, the tall green bracken bending under their feet, by the silent mere, covered in many places by weeds and slime, down the oak and beech avenue, till they came to a rather tottering white gate which admitted them into the ride. The boughs wanted cutting, and in places even Mary had to stoop her

head as they passed beneath them over a path made rough and slippery by great moss-covered roots.

‘Tell me about Lady Giffard,’ said St. Aubyn. ‘I suppose in her day the path was more used, and the boughs cut, or she certainly would have had her hat knocked off as she rode down here.’

‘It is a very sad story,’ said Mary, in the rather low, pathetic voice that her companion thought one of the greatest of her charms. ‘She was the wife of Sir Charles Giffard, the man in the crimson silk coat and brocaded waistcoat whose picture hangs opposite hers. He used to gamble, I believe ; and he drank too, and was very unkind to her. So she tried to run away with a man who used to come and stay here a great deal, Colonel St. Leger. I suppose he was very brave and handsome, and sorry for her.’

‘And what did the husband do ?’

‘They fought a duel, and Sir Charles killed him. Mrs. Smallpiece always says it is such a good moral, and a warning, and so on ; but *I* feel——’

‘Do you sympathize with *her*?’ said St. Aubyn, in his caressing voice.

‘I think I do ; because—because she would have given up everything—her beautiful house, and her jewels, and all that women care for—for the sake of the poor man whom she loved. I can’t help liking a woman who can love like that, though of course I know she was very wrong.’

St. Aubyn drew nearer to her, and took her hand in his.

‘I think,’ he said, ‘that *you* yourself have the same capacity for loving, and of giving up all for the man you love, as poor Lady Giffard had. What do you say? Am I right?’

His voice shook a little, and Mary trembled from head to foot.

‘I hardly know,’ she said. And, with a supreme effort of will, that left her face deadly white, she added, in a low voice that was almost a whisper, looking away from her companion into the brambly undergrowth beneath the trees, ‘I never told you, I ought to have told you, I am going to marry my cousin Dick!’

There was a long, long silence, and Mary felt as if she were passing through a painful dream, and struggling in vain to awake from its grasp. She was conscious that St. Aubyn was knocking off the head of a large-leaved plant at their feet; that a squirrel looked at them with his shy bright eyes, and sprang into a hollow tree above their heads; that a pheasant, with a frightened whirr of wings, started up from the thicket and soared away into the sky. At last she lifted her eyes to his.

What she read in that one glance saddened and terrified her. Instead of the kindly,

half-bright, half-tender smile that she knew so well, she saw a haggard face, with a sneer upon the lips, and an almost cruel expression in the eyes that had suddenly become hard and cold.

When he spoke, it was in a voice so totally unlike his own that Mary Giffard started.

‘I must apologize,’ he said, ‘for being a little slow in offering my congratulations. The fact is, I *was* rather taken aback at your news. You see, I had been under the impression that you were one of the very frankest of human beings, and that you and I were — well, such intimate friends that you would not have kept me long in ignorance as to anything of such great importance concerning your life.’

‘I know,’ she answered, trembling very much, ‘that I have been entirely wrong in not telling you. I have no real excuse to offer; I have *tried* to persuade myself that, as my uncle and aunt did not wish

my engagement to be announced yet, I was right in not telling you. But I did not really deceive myself. Oh, please forgive me! I cannot bear to see you look angry with me!

‘I assure you you are mistaken,’ he replied, in a bitter tone that cut her like the sting of a lash. ‘You are perfectly in your rights to keep anything you like from a new acquaintance — who deluded himself into thinking he was a friend—like myself. Why on earth should I be “angry” with you? Your future life can be no real concern of mine, excepting, of course, that I hope you may be as happy as you—deserve to be.’

‘Why do you speak like that? You have never said anything to me in that voice, or looked as you do now, before!’

‘Hadn’t we better change the subject?’ said St. Aubyn coldly. ‘Please don’t imagine I am taking you to task in any way. I have heard, I think, that your cousin is a

very amiable and good-looking young man, so I am sure I trust you have a bright future before you. But it is getting late, and it feels to me as if we were going to have thunder. Hadn't we better be walking towards home ?

For a mile they walked along, quite silently, over the mossy roots, and under the overhanging boughs. Then when they came into the park, and saw the old house standing sharply defined against a lurid black and yellow sky, Mary hazarded a remark.

‘What a lovely light there is over the house !’

‘Yes,’ he answered, rather quickly ; ‘and your mention of the house reminds me, Miss Giffard, that I have been very remiss in not offering you also my congratulations on the fact that it will be yours one of these days. It must be a great satisfaction to you to realize that you will be the proud possessor of one of the most beautiful places in Eng-

land. You are wiser in your generation, after all, than your poor ancestress, Lady Giffard!

The tears started to Mary's eyes.

'You *know* it is cruel and unjust to speak to me like that. I should never have accepted Dick if—if I had known——' Here she stopped short, for it was impossible to finish the sentence: 'If I had known I should meet you.'

Her heart was very sore. St. Aubyn had contrived to put her completely in the wrong throughout; and there was enough of truth in what he said to make his unworthy sarcasm all the harder to bear. As they neared the house they saw Mrs. Smallpiece waiting to accost them on the steps. St. Aubyn mentally consigned her to an uncomfortable place, as she shook her finger reprovingly at the pair.

'Oh! Sir William, how naughty of you to keep Mary out so long! And Mary, you

bad girl, you *quite* forgot, I see, that it is the penny-reading night, and that you were coming to the Rectory first. Won't you join us too, Sir William? You won't find much to eat, only a bachelor's pie, and a "spotted Tommy" (that is Mr. Smallpiece's favourite pudding); but you remember the old saying, "Light suppers make long days," so do come!

Sir William said he was extremely sorry that he had so many arrears of work to get through he feared he couldn't accept Mrs. Smallpiece's hospitality. Then with rather a cold shake of the hand to Mary, and a jocose remark about a book to Mr. Giffard, who had joined them on the steps, he started to walk home. And he never turned his head to look back, though Mary watched him until a bend in the avenue concealed him from sight. She went in, shaking from head to foot, and hurriedly scribbled these few lines on a sheet of notepaper :

‘DEAR SIR WILLIAM,

‘Do come to tea to-morrow. There is so much I want to tell you.

‘Yours most sincerely,

‘M. GIFFARD.’

On her return from the penny-reading, as she was wishing her uncle and aunt good-night in the drawing-room, Potkin brought in the answer on a silver tray. Mary tore it open with a throbbing heart. It ran as follows :

‘DEAR MISS GIFFARD,

‘I am so sorry that I cannot accept your kind invitation to tea to-morrow, as I am off early to London. I do not quite know when I shall be back. I may possibly run down to Devonshire and pay a visit to the Annesleys. Please tell Mr. Giffard he shall have the book I mentioned in a day or two.

‘Truly yours,

‘WM. ST. AUBYN.’

And Mary Giffard, with an aching brain and a sickening pain at her heart, wearily climbed the stairs leading to her little room. She flung herself down by her bedside, and burst into a passion of tears. Hers was the violent weeping of a child over its broken toy, or frustrated plans, rather than the more quiet grief of a woman. But she had a great deal to learn yet. When we have fully grasped the fact that the very sweetness of our dream is in itself a proof that it is fleeting and intangible, there is a resignation even in our tears.





CHAPTER VII.

MARY GIFFARD hardly knew how she lived through the next few days ; the saddest that she had ever known in her life of twenty-two years. She found herself quite unable to keep her mind concentrated upon any sort of reading ; and, alas ! her attempts at verse translation were the most complete failures. Her head ached as she racked her brain to find rhymes, and then, in despair, she would fling the blotted sheets into the grate, and sit silent, and lost in sad thoughts, at the window of her little bedroom. But of one thing she was determined, that neither Uncle John nor her aunt should ever guess that the departure of Sir William St. Aubyn

had given her this heartbreak. So in their presence the poor child was ostentatiously cheerful, and laughed and talked almost more than she had ever been known to do in her life before.

It was a tremendous effort, and she suffered for it during the long sleepless nights, when she would lie awake hour after hour, recalling every detail of St. Aubyn's conversation, every changing expression on his face, every tone of his voice. She remembered how sometimes on former nights, a week or two ago, she had awakened now and then, half-smiling, after dreaming of his presence ; and how she then would sit up in her bed, saying half-aloud, ' He will be here to-morrow,' before she laid her head again on the pillow. *Now* when she awoke, it was with a vague haunting sense of grief, and loss irreparable ; and her face began to look pale and drawn, and the sleepless nights to leave black circles under her sad gray eyes.

One afternoon Mr. Tonge drove over, full of conversation, as he usually was.

‘I wonder what is keeping St. Aubyn away so long?’ he remarked. ‘But, ah! though I say I *wonder*, I have a pretty shrewd guess.’

Mary’s cheeks flamed as the Squire of Chatell-cum-Jawby continued :

‘I think I have heard that there is an attraction somewhere in London. I have almost always found, with men of his age and stamp, that after a good deal of experience of all sorts of society, you know, Giffard, they end up with a *liaison* with a married woman, whose hold over them very often lasts for years.’

Mrs. Tonge looked shocked.

‘Oh, Charles, don’t say such things! I dare say Sir William means to settle down and marry now. It looks like it, his coming to stay in the country; and I am sure he

is a very nice man, though rather old for a young girl to fancy, perhaps.'

'Don't you believe it, not he!' said Mr. Tonge in his most cheerful manner. 'I say, who is this good-looking young fellow?'

Lord Castleford, wearing a very well-fitting pair of gaiters and holding a hunting-crop in his hand, was advancing rather shyly towards the terrace. Now that he had arrived at Brereton, he had a foolish sensation that he did not quite know how to account for his presence. When he had shaken hands with Mr. Giffard, and glanced at Mary, who was looking wonderfully attractive in her rose-coloured cotton frock and black hat, and burnt his mouth with hot tea, he was uncertain what to do next.

But Mr. Tonge, who knew everybody's pedigree, as well as their income, soon broke into a flow of conversation about Castleford's father, who was in his house at Eton; and his aunt, who married Mrs. Tonge's third

cousin ; and his sister, Lady Alice, whose photograph in her Drawing-room dress he had seen in a shop-window ; and he kept the ball of conversation effectually rolling for half an hour and more.

Poor Castleford was longing for a few words with Mary, who was sitting under an arch of the alcove opposite to him, her sweet face framed by overhanging white roses and their leaves, and who was obviously perfectly indifferent to his presence. At last he took courage, and cutting Mr. Tonge rather short in an anecdote about 'your father and I, as boys in the same house,' etc., walked across to where she was sitting.

'I wanted to ask you, Miss Giffard,' he said, 'if I might bring my sister over here to see the house next week? She and I are tremendous pals, and I know you would like her. She is coming to stay at the King's Hotel.'

Mary smiled, a sweet, indifferent smile,

and said she would be very glad to show the house to anyone.

Castleford went on, getting more and more shy as he became conscious of her unresponsive manner :

‘I have so often thought of our visit here the other day, Miss Giffard, and of how kind you were, taking so much trouble. Do you ever come to London? I hope you do, for my regiment is going away very soon. and—it would be very nice if I thought we should meet again.’

‘We are going up in November, I think,’ said Mary. ‘But we are not likely ever to meet. I don’t know anyone in London, and I never go out.’

Castleford was looking at Mary’s profile, with its little Greek nose and long eyelashes, as he flicked his gaiters with his whip.

‘I wish you knew my people,’ he said. ‘You and my father would get on like steam. I heard you say you liked poetry, and he

writes a lot. And he knows no end about pictures. You must let me know when you come to London, and I will bring my mother and Alice to see you.'

Mary said it would be very kind of Lady Wakefield to call, but that her uncle had no London house.

'We generally go to some little lodgings in Ebury Street,' she said.

Castleford stayed on so long, that Mr. Tonge, who had originally determined to 'see him out,' at last rose to go.

'What a pity it is,' he remarked to Mrs. Tonge, as they bumped along in a very springless vehicle over the ruts and through the lanes, 'that Mary should make up to young men in the manner she does! Of course Castleford is a tremendous *parti*, and it is natural a girl like that should wish to cultivate him; but the way she got him to herself in a corner under the arches was almost indecent, I thought.'

The young man alluded to at last trotted off on a very good-looking polo pony, and Uncle John and his wife and niece went in to dinner. They had arrived at 'tipsy-cake,' when Potkin brought a message for Mary from the village that 'Nelly Cubbidge was much worse, and would she please walk down to the village directly to see her.'

Mary felt a pang of remorse as she thought of how little poor Nelly had occupied her mind during these last days, and of how she had neglected to go and read to her, as she had fully intended to do. Was her love—for she no longer now attempted to disguise to herself the nature of her feeling for St. Aubyn—was her love rendering her callous and wicked, indifferent even to the pain of one who had suffered so much more than she herself? She took a large bunch of white and pale pink roses from a glass in the ante-room, and quickly putting on her

garden hat, walked to the cottage, which lay on the outskirts of Brereton village.

She found Mrs. Cubbidge in the state parlour, alternately blowing her nose with, and shedding tears into, a large red handkerchief, and talking in the very loudest of whispers to a bevy of sympathizing matrons. Mary hastened past them into the sick girl's room. There she found more matrons, with very creaky shoes, crowding round the bed, and absorbing the very little air that there already was in the chamber of death. One woman was holding Nelly's head and moistening her lips. The eyes of the sufferer were open, with a glazed expression; but she hardly appeared to be conscious of her surroundings. The evening was drawing in, and one small lamp at the head of the bed shed a flickering light on the wan face, and the aureole of chestnut hair that framed it. Mary pushed open the little window, and motioned to the women to leave the room;

she knelt down by Nelly, and laid the roses on the pillow, and supported the dying head with her firm young arm. As she did so, she fancied she saw a smile upon the lips.

‘You must not be frightened, Nelly darling,’ she whispered. ‘The worst will be over soon, and I know—I *know* you will be so happy after all the pain and sorrow. And Nell, I wanted to tell you, and I—that I do understand so well now—what you felt, and what you said about heaven being no heaven without the one person one loves best. I did not know then what you meant, but, oh! I do—I do now. God cannot be angry with us; He gives us these feelings, and He must be sorry for us.’ There was no sign on Nelly’s dying face as to whether the passionate whisper had reached her ears and brain. ‘You will pray for me up there, Nelly?’ said Mary Giffard. ‘I want your prayers very much, for you

know what I feel, and how very, very miserable I am.'

No sound escaped the drawn lips, but there seemed to be a calmer, more tender expression in the eyes; and Mary fancied that there was a little pressure of the cold hand that lay in hers. The lamp was burning low; a large moth flew in, and hurled itself against the light; and a cool breeze came sighing from the lattice on the faces of the two girls. The door was gently opened, and Mary saw Mr. Stapleton upon the threshold, with the sacred vessels in his hand, come prepared to administer the last rites of the Church; but it was too late, for though Nelly still breathed, she was by this time entirely unconscious. A strange fancy came into John Stapleton's head as he watched the two faces under the dying flicker of the lamp. Their curious resemblance struck him more forcibly than ever, and it seemed to him as if they were really one and

the same person, the wasted figure in the bed being the travel-worn, sin-stained body ; and Mary Giffard, in her light draperies, with her tender innocent eyes, representing the spirit, untrammelled now by the fetters of the flesh, preparing for its flight to the Great Beyond.

There was one last flicker of light, a sputtering noise as the lamp went out, then silence and dusk, swiftly passing into darkness. In the still and starless night the Angel of Death, who, they tell us, looks so terrible in the distance, but beautiful exceedingly as he draws near, bent over the narrow bed ; and he kissed the forehead of the world-worn woman who lay upon it, and bore away one more weary, sinful soul in his tender arms.



CHAPTER VIII.

A FEW days afterwards there was a pathetic little funeral gathering in Brereton village. Mrs. Cubbidge insisted upon chartering a solitary black-horsed fly from Canford, in which she and a few near relatives drove to the churchyard in state. Mary Giffard was there, and before she walked home she left a beautiful wreath of white passion-flowers upon the grave.

‘I am sure Miss Mary’s done everythink ’ansome,’ said Mrs. Cubbidge to a few chosen spirits at tea during the afternoon. ‘She says as she’ll put up a white marble cross and a “tex” on it, which is more than a girl

as conducted herself like Nelly had any call to expect.'

That same afternoon Mary, who was feeling sadder and more restless than usual, drove over to Canford village in her little pony-carriage, and having sent the groom home with it, prepared to walk across the stretch of heather-land where the boundary of Surrey begins, round a long belt of fir-woods, till the road should eventually bring her back again into Brereton. It was an oppressive afternoon, with an unmistakable feeling of approaching thunder in the air; and the sky, with its heavy masses of dark cloud and lurid gleams of yellow light, also betokened a storm before nightfall. Mary walked quickly along over the brilliant violet heather, in which little pale blue butterflies were playing at hide and seek, towards the dark firs at the edge of the moorland. It was a wild part of the country—a curious contrast to the green tranquil lanes and sunny beech-

woods of the Hampshire boundary adjoining; very deserted, too, at this evening hour—or, indeed, at any time, for the path Mary had chosen was rarely taken by the Canford villagers, who preferred a less circuitous route when they happened to pay a visit to their Brereton neighbours. The silence and solitude of the landscape were very grateful to Mary. The restless black clouds hurrying over the sky seemed to her like those thoughts of gloom and grief that were for ever surging through her tired brain. She was a little startled, though not in the least frightened, when, as she neared the first group of firs, she heard a quick step, obviously a man's, upon the heather close behind her. And just as she was turning her head to see who it might be, a little whimpering bark of delight and recognition fell on her ear, and two golden paws began dragging at her skirt. Chevy was obviously overjoyed at this unexpected meeting with one of his greatest

friends, and the person who followed him did not look sorry either. Mary's face had become very white; her knees shook so much it seemed as though she would fall prostrate upon the purple heather; and although she tried to speak, to her dismay she found that no words would come. And there was such a lump rising in her throat that it caused two tears of pain to shine in her beautiful eyes. St. Aubyn's face had lost the hard expression which it had worn at their last meeting, and there was almost a smile on his lips. He, too, was pale, and the lines in his face seemed more strongly marked than ever. But when he spoke his voice was firm and clear, and kind as of old.

‘You are a little glad to see me?’ he said.

For all answer Mary smiled, with her eyes as much as with her lips.

‘I dare say you are surprised at my

coming back ?' continued he. ' I wonder—shall I tell you the real, true reason why I came ?'

They had just entered the dark little fir copse.

' I wanted so to see you,' said Mary, with her eyes bent down on the rough track strewn with cones. ' I wanted to tell you that Uncle John wished me *very* much to marry Dick, and we had always been much together, like a brother and sister ; and so, though I was *dreadfully* disappointed that Dick didn't care about soldiering, I fancied we might be very happy ; and I was glad to think I shouldn't go away from Brereton, and that I should please Uncle John so much by doing things to the place ; but now I feel I would give all up—all I possess in the world, if only I might be free.'

He caught her little hand in his, and kissed it passionately many times.

' I haven't told you yet why I came back,

Miss Giffard. Well, it was for the very simplest and best of all reasons—because I couldn't keep away. I know I behaved like a brute that evening during our walk, but the fact is I hardly knew what I was doing, and I was staggered completely by the blow that fell upon me. I had no earthly right to say to you, who are such a million times better than I, the insulting things I did ; but you will forgive me, won't you, because when—when a man feels like that, he can't be guarded in his words. Well, I went home, and said to myself I would forget you ; but, instead, your face was always before me, night and day, and your dear voice sounding in my ears. I went to London, and tried to fancy I was amusing myself ; and then I went down to my sister's, Alice Wakefield's, but I couldn't stay there ; I felt I must see your face again, for something told me you were not happy either. Oh, darling ! darling ! say you forgive me,

and that you care ever so little about me !'

The answer in the sweet dark eyes was enough for St. Aubyn ; the next moment his arms were round her, and she was crying like a child for very joy upon his shoulder. They had come to a turn in the fir-wood where the path opened out to leave a clear space, and where a few great trunks of newly-felled trees were lying. Here and there a golden shaft of light from the wild sky had pierced through the red stems and the black needles, and lay quivering across the earth.

'Let us sit here and talk a little,' said St. Aubyn.

And for an hour or more those two sat on, regardless of time or of aught else but one another,

'They two alone, and the world dead.'

Her soft round cheek rested against his worn one, and her little hand in his ; and

Mary Giffard, with the undeveloped passion of her nature, with her strong yearning for love, of which she herself was almost unconscious, entered upon a new life during that one short hour. She forgot all her self-torturings and self-questionings; all the doubts and fears which had troubled her during the past sad days; all anxiety as to the future. She knew nothing, felt nothing, realized nothing, but that the arm of the man she loved was around her, his kisses on her lips, his passionate eyes looking into hers. And it was well for her that it should be so, that whatever Fate should have in store for her and 'Time, with his gift of tears,' should bring, she should have one perfect recollection of joy unspeakable, one dream of undimmed happiness, one glimpse of that glorious and mysterious kingdom of love which is as the border-land betwixt earth and heaven.

'It all seems so strange,' she said, looking

at her lover with eyes in which the tears were scarcely yet dry. 'The past week is now like a horrible nightmare. I will try never to think of it again. Oh, what am I that you should really love me, as I know and believe now you do ! I am very ignorant and foolish in comparison to you, but it will be such a delight to listen to you and learn ; but I think all the same that I *must* make you happy, as I love you with all my soul.'

St. Aubyn drew her still closer into his arms, and kissed her sweet lips once more.

'It is I,' he said, in a low voice, 'who am unworthy ; but the rest of my life, such as it is, will be consecrated to you. You shall never regret, dear one, all you have given up for one who loves you so very dearly. I think I am a better man already, somehow, since I knew you ; and you will lead me higher still, you will teach

me many things that I have never known, and help me to believe in others in which I have lost faith. You will always seem to me like Agnes (don't you remember, in that most lovable of novels ?) "pointing upward."

She smiled.

'I shall have rather a hard task before me,' she said, 'not in giving up a big house, or in teaching *you*—of course I don't mean that, but in breaking the news to dear old Uncle John. He had so set his heart upon my marrying Dick. Could I not, do you think, settle some of my money, when I come of age, upon Dick?'

'Heaven knows it is not your money I want,' said St. Aubyn fervently. 'Of course I am not well off, but I have been too much knocked about to be luxurious. Oh, darling! it is you, only you, whom I want to help and to love me for the remainder of life's journey.'

'I am *so* glad you are a soldier,' Mary

answered, 'and a soldier who has done such wonderfully brave things; I always wanted to meet you, when Uncle John said you ought to have had a Victoria Cross twice over. I used to be so angry with Dick when he said "soldiering was a bore unless you had money, and that he hated seeing a lot of private soldiers, etc." How lucky it is for me that you are *just* what you are!'

He laughed.

'I know on whose side all the good fortune is. Do you know—that night when I came to dine at Brereton—I *knew* I was falling in love with you, but I thought such a thing as a marriage between us could never be, and that it would be almost dishonourable in me if I tried to make you, who had seen so few people, like me. How much better it would be if you married my nephew, Bobby Castleford!'

'I wouldn't marry Lord Castleford on a

desert island !' said Mary with great fervour. 'In fact, I will never marry anyone but you.'

He looked down at the lovely chestnut head that was resting on his shoulder.

'God bless you, my love—my darling !' he whispered.

There was an ominous rolling sound of distant thunder, and the little wood had become very dark.

'Superstitious people,' said St. Aubyn, with a ring of sadness in his voice, 'would say that that was a bad omen.'

'I don't believe in omens ; besides, I have not been wicked, have I ? I couldn't prevent myself caring for you, and I must do so in this world—or another, always, always. Surely it would be more wrong for me to swear in a church that I love Dick, when I shall belong to you with my whole heart ?'

They passed out through the fir-trees into

a lane leading towards Brereton, and a few great drops of rain fell upon their faces.

‘You have no umbrella!’ said St. Aubyn in consternation, as he looked at Mary’s thin dress and unprotected shoulders.

‘Never mind, we can walk very quickly,’ and almost at a running pace the two hurried on through the damp green lanes until they reached Brereton village; then still further on to the park gates, which bore in their beautiful tracery of ironwork the motto of the Giffards, ‘*Garde la Foy.*’

‘Give me one more kiss,’ said St. Aubyn, ‘and you must call me by my name once. Say, “Good-night, Bill.”’

‘Good-night—Bill—darling; and you will come to-morrow morning to see me?’

One last pressure of the little hand, and she was through the gate, running down the lime avenue, and turning, every few minutes, in spite of the now heavily-falling rain, to

wave to him, with her child-like smile shining on her lips and eyes.

When Mary came up to the front door, she saw standing before it that nondescript vehicle of almost prehistoric times which was called by the Canford physician, Dr. Gregory, his 'covered conveyance,' and also Potkin on the steps, with an air of importance and mystery bristling over his entire countenance.

'What is the matter?' asked Mary, with a sudden sense of impending calamity.

A brilliant flash of lightning lit up the beautiful old façade of Brereton Royal, but neither that nor the tremendous thunder-clap that succeeded it had any perceptible effect on the aged animal who conveyed Dr. Gregory through his daily peregrinations.

'Your uncle was took with a fainting-fit, Miss Mary, not 'alf an hour after you'd gone with the pony. He's come to 'imself now. But, my word! 'e did look queer; we had

a bad job to bring 'im round; 'e did go stiff.'

Mary darted past Potkin, up the old oak stairs, till she finally canoned against the doctor, who was coming out of Uncle John's room.

'Don't agitate yourself, my dear young lady,' said he. 'Dear Mr. Giffard has had a bad attack of paralysis—a *very* nasty attack, I may say; but the last hour he has come round wonderfully. Will you kindly see that he is kept very quiet—*exceedingly* quiet, I should say, and that he has no worry of any kind? I will look in early to-morrow.'

And Dr. Gregory went out into the storm, which was by this time raging with great violence over Brereton Royal.

Mary went, very softly, into Uncle John's room. The first sight of his face gave her a choking sensation of grief, but she bravely kept back her tears, and took the thin hand in hers.

‘You will be much better soon, dear,’ she said very tenderly, as she stroked it.

Uncle John’s face seemed suddenly to have grown much older, and there was a sort of twitching about the lower part of it which frightened his niece considerably.

When he spoke, in a rather indistinct voice—strangely unlike his usual firm tones—the tears came into his eyes, although he only made a very commonplace observation.

‘Did you have a nice drive, dear?’ he asked.

Mary kissed the worn old face.

‘Don’t trouble to speak now, dear Uncle John. To-morrow, when you are quite well again, we will talk.’

‘I have had so much worry to-day,’ answered the poor old man, in a quivering voice. ‘Letters—business—all upset me—and I got very faint—Gregory says—all right soon.’

There were tears rolling down his cheeks

now. Mary kissed him once more, and here Mrs. Giffard looked in, and asked if 'he thought he could take a little salmon or plum-pudding, or would he like a nice mushroom?'

Decidedly there was no question of breaking any news to Uncle John to-night. Mary went up to bed with an aching heart, and after lying awake many hours, she at last fell into a heavy sleep, and dreamt that she and St. Aubyn were walking through a long, long wood, where all the trees shone like gold, and the birds sang so loud that she could hardly hear his voice. And suddenly, at the corner, they met Mr. Stapleton, in a costume similar to that worn by Waghorne, the keeper (which fact, however, did not surprise her in the least), and then they came out on to a barren stretch of heath-land, and there was a sound of thunder in her ears, and on looking round she found that St. Aubyn was gone, and that she was treading the desert path quite alone.



CHAPTER IX.

VERY early next morning Mary Giffard knocked at her uncle's door. His voice, which was clearer than it had been the night before, answered her in its usual kindly tone, and she walked into the room. Uncle John was propped up in bed with a great heap of pillows, and Potkin was giving him coffee from a spoon. He smiled when he saw his niece, and her sweet low voice, which had always a soothing influence upon the sick and the sorrowful, seemed to please him. A lovely, cloudless day had dawned since the tempestuous night hours had passed away, and through the wide-open window came warm gusts of air, and the voices of

many birds. Mary sat down by the bedside, and the faithful Potkin left the two together.

‘I am much better, my dear child,’ said Uncle John. ‘But I fancy I really *was* very ill last night—I don’t think your aunt has any idea how ill. She looked in here very kindly just now, and brought me up some hot buns; but I haven’t a great deal of appetite. Well, I wanted to tell you’—here there was a little quiver in his voice—‘what I didn’t say yesterday—about Dick’s letter. I must say it pained me very much.’

And there were tears in his eyes again.

‘I am so sorry, dear Uncle John, you should be worried like this. Perhaps Dick did not mean—did not think he would vex you.’

‘Hang his intentions!’ said Mr. Giffard in quite his own old excited manner. ‘Well, he says—he actually *has the face* to sit down and write to me, that boy who has cost me no

end of money already—that now he doesn't mean to go into the army *at all*! He dares to say he doesn't *like* soldiering, and he, a Giffard of Brereton Royal, one of a family who have been soldiers for hundreds of years!

Uncle John's face twitched painfully, and his hand shook so much that the cup of coffee narrowly escaped being overturned.

Mary looked very much grieved, and Uncle John went on, rather more indistinctly:

‘Well, he says he is leaving Crabbe this week, and that he must have a larger allowance, and that he can't live like a gentleman on what I give him, and that I am too old to understand what young men want. Then, after this letter, when I was feeling very much worried and tired out, what do they do but come up from the stables to say that Bryce has been over to look at Marshal Ney, and that he has got ringbone

so badly he doesn't think he'll ever do any work again !'

Marshal Ney was a very old horse, with a very aquiline nose, and he was an especial favourite of Uncle John's. And Mary (with the curious inconsistency of mind which prompts us to recall every kind of foolish trifle during the most important crises of our lives) here remembered a feebly jocose remark of Mrs. Tonge's concerning this venerable animal, to the effect that his name should have been spelt 'Neigh,' and how Mr. Tonge had (very excusably, for once) snubbed the poor lady's attempt at wit.

'And then,' continued Mr. Giffard, 'that was by no means the end of these miserable worries. Martin came over after luncheon, and was really extremely insolent to me, Mary. He said he should certainly give up his farm ; that I had promised him all sorts of improvements for years, and that they had never been carried out, and a

great deal more besides. What can I do? Goldney won't advance any more money—that I know; and Martin says two more of the principal tenants are going to throw up their farms too. If only you were once married to Dick, I know, my child, then you would let us raise some of your money, and things would go on smoothly. If you were once his wife, they would see it will all come right in time. Couldn't we have the marriage sooner?'

The old man was fairly crying by this time, and Mary's tender little heart bled for him. She pressed his hand and said:

'Dear, don't give way like this. It is sure to be all right. You are ill, and that's why you feel things so much.'

She could not frame her lips, poor child, to say that the marriage should soon take place, a marriage the prospect of which seemed to her now far worse than that of any purgatory; and a shiver ran through

her frame as she felt how impossible it would be ever—yes, ever—to break the news of her love for another man to Uncle John ; and how that he, with his old-fashioned, straitlaced views of honour, would never consent that one penny of her money should be spent on his property until she became the wife of his nephew and heir. In that one short half-hour the intoxicating cup to which she had barely laid her lips had been ruthlessly hurled to the ground and dashed to fragments ; the golden dream of one bright moment had melted away into the harsh daylight of cruel, prosaic life. Was it true that down a ‘long, long road of pain,’ with no arm to shelter, no loved voice to speak again in her ear those words that had thrilled and blessed her, she must walk henceforth alone for evermore ?

Mary Giffard, with a face white to the very lips, was standing on the steps, the air gratefully fanning her burning forehead,

when she saw Mrs. Smallpiece walking briskly up to the house, a large bottle in either hand.

‘Gracious me, Mary, my dear!’ said this lady, ‘I had quite a turn when the man who brought the letters (four letters and a halfpenny card) at half-past eight told me dear Mr. Giffard was ill! I should have stepped up long before this to see how you were all getting on; but I wanted to mix him one or two of my recipes that I am sure will help to set him on his legs again. I would have got one of the maids to help me, but my motto is: “Keep no more cats than will catch mice,” and they have enough to do to get through their own work. So all this mixing the medicines has made me late. My dear child, how pale you look! You should take a glass of stout at your meat-meals. But you must cheer up—remember, “a misty morn may be a clear day!”’

Mary told Mrs. Smallpiece a little concerning Dick, and her uncle's distress as to his behaviour in general, and yesterday's letter in particular.

'Ah!' said the rector's wife, with much sagacity, 'a pet lamb makes a cross ram. You know I always said to Mr. Smallpiece that your uncle and aunt spoilt Dick. *He* didn't agree with me, and said he used to take in pupils, and knew more about boys than I did. But an ounce of mother-wit is worth a pound of clergy, *I* say; and it was always as plain to me as print that Dick would give trouble. Dear me, here's Mr. Stapleton, so I'll go now, dear, if you don't mind letting me off; and I'll look in again whenever you want me.'

The sight of Mr. Stapleton's grave, yet gentle face was as balm to Mary Giffard's wounded spirit. As she looked at him, she realized that the expression of mingled strength, and sweetness, and patience which

it wore could only have been won after years of struggle, and hard endeavour and bitter pain. She instinctively felt that there was no story of sin or shame, or suffering, for which he would not have some wise counsel, some word of sympathy; and that, though he himself had attained to greater heights of saintliness and devotion than ordinary mortals ever reach, he cared yet more for the power he possessed of leading his erring fellow-men upward to where he stood, than for the mere saving of his own soul.

There was no one, excepting perhaps his sister Jane, who had the very remotest guess as to a struggle constantly going on within John Stapleton's heart. This ascetic clergyman had his own romance, and his wild visions of a possible happiness even in this fleeting world, just as much as any one of his more earth-bound friends. And his dream was standing before him clothed

in flesh upon this August morning. For some six years or more Stapleton had worshipped Mary Giffard with the single-hearted devotion of a great nature; but he had never breathed one word that would have led her, simple and free from vanity as she was, to suspect it. If he had not known of Mary's engagement to her cousin (which fact alone would have rendered it dishonourable in Stapleton's eyes to speak of his love to her), he would not for one instant have dreamt of asking the beautiful heiress to share his humble little home with him. His originally small fortune had nearly all gone to pay off the debts of an unsatisfactory elder brother, 'to give him one more chance,' John said, of breaking off from his past life, and settling down in the old gray manor house far away on the Yorkshire wolds; and what was left was certainly not spent either on himself or upon the tumble-down vicarage where he and Jane lived to-

gether, but given wherever poverty or sickness stretched out imploring hands for help.

Mary Giffard ran down the steps and welcomed her friend very heartily.

‘I am afraid Uncle John ought not to see anyone but me to-day, as he is to be kept very quiet ; but do come in and rest after your walk, and I want to give you some of Jane’s favourite carnations to take back to her.’

Mr. Stapleton followed her into the little room on the ground-floor which was supposed to be her own sitting-room. It was rather bare of furniture, but such as there was, the old-fashioned, high-backed sofa, the uncomfortable tapestried chairs, and the Chippendale cabinets, had enough individuality to give it a certain charm of its own. Two or three worn Eastern rugs lay upon the polished boards. There was a piano, very cracked and husky in tone, and a

guitar lying upon it, an instrument which had been a present from Dick, and which Mary had made futile endeavours to learn without the aid of a master. There were books and scrap-books lying about; and upon an oak table with crooked legs and brass handles was heaped a mass of *La France* roses and carnations of many glowing colours, waiting to be arranged in Chinese bowls.

‘I have wanted to thank you,’ said Mary, ‘for your great kindness to poor Nelly. That last sad evening you hurried away so quickly I could not get a word with you. I dare say you knew I always took an especial interest in Nelly? I think she *did* wish to be good, but it was harder to her than it is to a good many; and she had so much sorrow, which made her reckless and bitter. But, Mr. Stapleton, I know *you* have never judged one person harshly all your life long!’

‘How can we judge, my dear Miss Mary?’ he answered. ‘We have all the same hard lessons to learn. Some grasp them very quickly, others must toil on for years before they understand them. But we all shall in time. Some are taught in the simple, every-day course of things, with few temptations, few heart-breaking struggles, and no insight into the darker pages of life’s book; others *must* learn “by means of evil that good is best.” But I am taking a mean advantage of being a parson to give you a dull, commonplace little sermon.’

Mary was looking at him with earnest eyes.

‘Mr. Stapleton,’ she said, ‘I want to ask you something. Mr. Smallpiece said once, in a sermon, that there was no such thing as two duties clashing; that there can be only one path of duty, in fact. How is one to know the right road? Supposing that, to please one person, you have to give pain

—the most terrible pain—to another, and that you feel that, by so doing, you may not only make them suffer, but do them harm and embitter their whole life? Oh! which is the path one ought to take?’

He looked at her half inquiringly, and with the kind, tender expression that always gave his hearers so much confidence in his sympathy.

‘I know,’ he said, ‘in a case like that, the rule I should myself follow. I should try, God helping, to perform the harder duty of the two. We are so inclined, dear Miss Mary, to think a thing must be a duty because we *wish* it to be one. But unless one knows all the circumstances of the case, it is almost impossible to advise. The hardest path is generally *short*, if rough and stony, and the easy path has many windings, and labyrinths, and thickets to pass through before we reach home. But you know that

I believe, if we are true to ourselves and to others, that

“ We meet at the same little door when all’s done ;
The ways they are many—the end it is one.”

He had hardly finished speaking when steps were heard outside the door, which opened to admit—first Chevy, with his ruff standing out in a sort of bush round his neck, and his eyes shining like two topazes, and after him Chevy’s master.

‘ I have just prevented a deadly encounter between Chevy and Lord Beaconsfield,’ said St. Aubyn, laughing, and shaking hands with the clergyman very cordially. ‘ Mr. Wag-horne was much agitated, but it all ended well. I am so sorry to hear Mr. Giffard is ill—nothing serious, I hope ?’

Mr. Stapleton said he was going to borrow a book from the library, and took his departure ; whereupon St. Aubyn’s manner changed, as might have been expected.

‘My darling, how white and tired you look!’ he said, as he sat down on the sofa beside Mary and put his arm round her; ‘and you have not kissed me once yet. You wicked little woman, I believe you have repented of your folly, after all!’

The joyous tones of his voice showed that nothing was really further from his thoughts, and he drew her yet nearer into his arms.

Mary offered no resistance. She allowed him to kiss her cheeks, her hair, her mouth. The spell of his voice, and the light in his blue eyes, so full of passion and tenderness, held her fast; but she said no word.

‘What is the matter, Mary, my sweet one? Why won’t you speak to me? There is such a sad expression in your eyes as you look at me! Have I vexed you? Oh, darling! I know I am clumsy and stupid; forgive me if I said anything I should not;

I forget everything when you are by me—everything but that we love each other, and that you will soon belong only to me, for ever and ever ; isn't it so ?

And then with dry eyes (eyes like those of a wounded animal who does not understand why a cruel hand should have stricken him down in full vigour of life), and a voice whose tones of utter anguish struck like a chill upon St. Aubyn's ear, Mary Giffard spoke :

‘What you say can never be—never, never, never! I may live to be old—(Oh, my God! I hope I may be spared a long life)—but if I do, I shall always love you, though I *cannot* be your wife. When there are two duties, one must choose the hardest. I have to marry Dick, for Uncle John's sake, who is ill, and unhappy, and wishes it so very much ; but I shall care for you till I die. The Giffards' motto is “*Garde la Foy*,” you know, and my faith and love must be yours,

my darling, my own darling, for ever and ever !'

His arms had loosened their grasp, and his face was as pale as hers. There was in his eyes, that were fixed on hers in a sort of agony of supplication, something of the expression that they had worn during the interview in Lady Giffard's Wood.

'I am at a loss to understand you,' he said, trying hard to control himself, and speaking very low. 'What sort of a love can yours be, that will be all-responsive and passionate one day, and that will give up everything the next, for the sake of a mere whim, a foolish, quixotic fancy, a ridiculous, high-flown notion of duty? That is not the affection of the sort of woman who could satisfy me! No; she must be willing to give up all, every other part of her life—her past, her present, her future—for the sake of the man whom she professes to love.'

He had got up from the sofa where they were sitting, and was pacing rapidly up and down the room.

‘Think again,’ he said. ‘I am not the sort of man who will stand being made a fool of twice. You either love me, as you professed you did yesterday when we were in the wood—my God! how *could* you manage to look as you did, if it wasn’t true?—or you have been deceiving yourself, as well as me. In the latter case, the sooner we say good-bye the better. Answer me once—will you give up your cousin and be my wife, or is it to be good-bye?’

She had risen to her feet now, and, trembling in every limb, was holding on to one of the tall tapestried chairs.

‘It must be good-bye,’ she whispered.

But her struggle was not ended yet. She was saying over and over again mechanically to herself, ‘The hard duty, oh! can I do it?’ when St. Aubyn once more caught

her in his arms. His passionate embrace almost terrified her. Again and again he kissed her.

‘I *cannot* let you go!’ he cried. ‘You are my last chance of happiness. I say farewell to my hopes of heaven if I lose you.’

But she did not answer, and one look at her rigid face showed that she had not swerved from her resolution. Not one of her soldier ancestors had ever fought a harder battle, or borne his wounds with a truer heroism, than did his little descendant on that sunny August morning, when the light in her young life was darkened for ever.

An expression disagreeably like a sneer came over Sir William St. Aubyn’s countenance.

‘You have taught me, Miss Giffard, what I dare say was a very needful lesson in humility. At my age I ought not to have

been such a consummate fool. I have seen enough of the world, and of women, but I had somehow or other imagined that you were perfectly sincere, and loyal, and unworldly—unlike the rest, in fact. If I am a little harsh and uncivil, you must forgive me, for I shall not trouble you any more, either with vain complaints or appeals to you for affection. I wish you good-bye, and may you have every happiness in the future. I have not the smallest doubt that you will. It is unlikely we shall ever meet again. It was very selfish of me to try and persuade you to give up so much for a worn-out, homeless man like myself.'

Chevy was watching the pair with his bright, inquiring eyes. He saw that something was wrong, and thought it was very odd that his presence should attract so little attention.

When Mary Giffard lifted her hands from her face to wipe away the blinding tears

that ran down her cheek, St. Aubyn was gone, with no parting kiss, no word of pardon or of love, to soften the bitterness of a last farewell.





CHAPTER X.

THE leaves in the Brereton woods were changing their heavy green summer foliage for the golden and crimson colours of early autumn. Uncle John had recovered his usual health and cheerfulness, and was thoroughly engrossed in the composition of the sixth volume of 'Great Leaders.' Mrs. Giffard had threaded so many thousand stamps that she had bethought herself that a little change of employment would be agreeable, so she had taken to the manufacture of newspaper quilts for the poor in the East of London, and to the weaving of woollen helmets for deep-sea fishermen, who, if they cared at all about their personal

appearance, might hardly have been grateful for Mrs. Giffard's curious specimens of head-gear.

During this autumn many events of deep and stirring interest had occurred in the neighbourhood of Brereton Royal. A distant relative of Mr. Tonge's, on his departure for a better world, had bequeathed to that gentleman and his wife a series of valuable legacies, including a mechanical-exercise chair, a silver warming-pan, and a handsome cairngorm *parure*. These, together with various other useful and ornamental articles, were on view at Chatellcum-Jawby, and were duly inspected by an admiring neighbourhood. Mrs. Smallpiece, indeed, had been so greatly impressed, that she had been heard to observe that 'you can't see green cheese but your mouth must water.'

And a fourth Master Sweeney had gladdened the paternal residence of Eaglesnest,

Canford, with his presence, and received the names of Theophilus Farnborough, after his papa, and his papa's ducal patron ; and poor Marshal Ney had quitted Brereton for the happy hunting-grounds, the while Lord Beaconsfield was understood to be more vivacious and uncontrollable than ever.

But there was yet another occurrence of deeper interest, and a more important subject of conversation than any of these events above alluded to. And this was the departure of Sir William St. Aubyn, K.C.B., from the Grange, on the plea of important business in London. Mr. Bevan, now on his homeward journey, had been not a little mystified and vexed on receipt of the following communication from his friend :

‘ MY DEAR ARTHUR,

‘ After all, I find I must give up my idea of a pleasant autumn at the Grange, with its excellent shooting and other attrac-

tions. It is absolutely necessary that I should be in London at this time, for reasons which I cannot well explain to you ; but believe me, my dear old boy, I shall ever be grateful to you for your kindness, and perhaps some day you will give me another chance.'

Bevan gave a long whistle when he read this letter, and wondered what ' Bill was up to now.'

' Ah ! I suppose it is little Nora Annesley,' he thought ; and the end of it was that he decided to hasten back and shoot the well-stocked coverts on his property himself this year.

And Mary ? To casual observers she looked much as usual ; she talked and laughed, and apparently took all her old interest in her village friends, and her music, and her reading. But she certainly was very pale, and a great deal thinner, and even Uncle John noticed that she very often

sent an almost untasted plateful away at luncheon and dinner.

‘I think, my dear, you want a little change,’ he said to her kindly one day, when—the light falling full on Mary’s face, as she was writing for him in the library—he noticed how thin her cheeks were. ‘Couldn’t Gregory give you a tonic? But we shall soon be going up to London, and I am sure that will do you good.’

Mr. Giffard even went so far as to ask Mrs. Smallpiece if she had noticed any change in his niece’s appearance.

‘At the spring and fall of the year,’ replied that lady with decision, ‘people do get a little upset. I should say she is just a little dyspeptic. Now, if she would only take a glass of cold water the first thing in the morning, say seven or half-past seven, dear Mr. Giffard, and a little dandelion-wine before her meals, she would be right in no time.’

It was really wonderful that Mary Giffard was able to go about her daily employment in the way that she did, for besides the fact of her almost complete loss of appetite, she seldom slept now for more than two or three hours together. Very often she would lie awake all the night long, sometimes shedding hot tears of bitter regret over her brief glimpse of happiness—happiness which a cruel presentiment told her would never again be hers. Sometimes she would wonder if her lost love ever thought of her, or if he had completely effaced her image from his soul; occasionally she would look forward into the future with feelings of terror and foreboding inexpressible.

The newspapers told her a little of St. Aubyn's movements from time to time. From them she learnt that he had gone to Wakefield Castle, where his sister had been entertaining a large gathering to meet royalty; then, that he was paying a series

of visits in Scotland, and, at the time of which we are now writing, that he had returned to London.

Mr. Tonge, on a certain chilly October afternoon, when he and his wife and Mr. Giffard and Mary were pacing up and down the terrace, was, as usual, full of speculations as to Sir William and the cause of his absence.

‘Business!’ said the Squire of Chatellcum-Jawby, with a suppressed chuckle. ‘Ha, ha! I expect *somebody* wouldn’t allow him to be so much away. The bravest and wisest of mankind are led by the nose sometimes, just as much as we inferior mortals: eh, Giffard? There is a lovely golden-haired lady——’

Mary was becoming by this time almost accustomed to Mr. Tonge’s playful manner of turning a knife in the wound which had pierced her poor little heart. But she could not help feeling grateful for the diversion

created by the advent of two people on horseback, now slowly riding up to the front door.

‘Castleford, by Jove!’ said Mr. Tonge, ‘and a lady. Ah! it’s Lady Alice; I recognise her from the photo. Not a bad-looking girl, and a neat figure; but she doesn’t look to me a patch on her aunt, Lady Charlotte, who used to be a favourite partner of mine in old days.’

Lady Alice had dismounted from her polo-pony, and went to meet Mr. Giffard with a charming, cordial smile.

‘I have heard so much of Brereton from Bobbie, Mr. Giffard, and *what* a lovely old place it is! He tells me you have been kindness itself to him, and that it has made all the difference to him having you for neighbours.’

Lady Alice was ridiculously like her brother in face and manner, as well as in her decidedly sporting proclivities. She

had the same round, fresh, good-looking face, with bright eyes and perfect teeth, and the same wavy brown hair. She was quite determined, as a loyal sister, to do her very best to be agreeable to the Giffard family; for before she and Castleford had started on their ride, the following conversation had taken place between the two :

‘My dear Bobbie, you look very down on your luck ! What’s the matter, my dear old boy ? You may just as well tell me at once, because I shall find out, anyhow, if you don’t.’

Which was no doubt perfectly true. For Lady Alice understood her brother’s character quite as well as, or better than he did himself ; and she was the greatest friend and confidante he had in the world.

‘I dare say you would, Tiny.’ (This was the name by which Lady Alice was known in her family circle.) ‘Well, the fact is, I have made up my mind to marry. It’s

to no one you know ; she's a lady in this part of the world. You needn't look so flabbergasted—I suppose I am old enough to know what I'm about ; and father said last year he wished I'd marry.'

'Yes—but——' And here speech failed Lady Alice.

Dreadful visions of what she was pleased mentally to designate 'a garrison flirt' rose before her eyes. Could it be possible that Bobbie, who knew everybody nice in London, and was always 'crabbing' her own friends, should have been taken in by some terrible second-rate woman, after all ?

Castleford went on, in a dogged, solemn sort of manner :

'I am not at all sure that she will say yes.' (Here Alice looked a little sarcastic, and very incredulous.) 'You needn't make those absurd faces, because I tell you what's a fact. She is the sort of woman who

might marry any mortal man she chose. And she is fifty times prettier, and cleverer, and nicer than those stupid images of girls who go grinning about in London, with nothing to talk about. You heard me say once what a ripping place Brereton was, and what a funny old boy old Giffard is with his menagerie? Well, I am going to marry his niece—that's to say, if she'll marry me, but I dare say she won't.'

After this colloquy Alice was, needless to say, a prey to the greatest curiosity regarding her possible sister-in-law, so nothing would satisfy her but to ride over that very day to Brereton Royal.

Mary was, as usual, an excellent cicerone, if more silent and quiet than usual; and it amused her to contrast Alice's enthusiasm for pictures and other objects of art with her almost laughable ignorance on those subjects. However, the two girls, Castleford noticed to his great satisfaction, seemed to

be getting on very well together ; and when the guests all went in to tea in the library, there was plenty of laughter and pleasant conversation.

Mr. Tonge, however, had no idea, as he afterwards expressed it to his wife, of taking a ' back-seat,' so he remarked very loudly, directing at the same time a sarcastic glance in the direction of that meekest of women :

'Capital thing, I must tell you, Giffard, the little Sweeney boy said yesterday to Mrs. Tonge. He asked her how old she was, and she didn't quite like it, you know (we don't when we get to that sort of age); so she told him the date of her birth, and said he must calculate from that. "Oh yes!" said he, "but you must first tell me if it was A.D. or B.C." Ha, ha! I tell Mrs. Tonge after that it's time she gave up curl-papers at night, and a Rubens hat in the day!'

When Castleford and his sister were riding homewards over the golden bracken, he asked her what she thought of Miss Giffard and his chances of success.

Lady Alice was very honest, as well as devoted to her brother, so she answered :

‘ Well, Bobbie darling, if you ask for my candid opinion, I am afraid she is not in love, really, with you. I mean, don’t you know, she didn’t look shy, or confused, or anything like that, you know. And I didn’t think she seemed particularly pleased when you said you *must* see her again before the regiment goes. She is very pretty, certainly—such lovely eyes ! but *I* think she is too pale.’

Castleford’s usually cheerful face looked very grave and sad.

‘ I thought she didn’t care a hang for me. But I shall try my luck, all the same, and know the worst. It’s quite true, she *does* look ill ; *I* noticed it. She used to have rosy

cheeks once. Do you know, Tiny, I have an idea—perhaps it is ridiculous—that she liked Bill St. Aubyn.'

'Uncle Bill!' cried Lady Alice; 'you don't say so! But do you know, Bobbie, now you put it into my head, I *did* observe, when someone or other mentioned Bill's name, that her face changed, and she got very silent after that. But Bill is *such* a flirt; he is always, I hear, in Mrs. Annesley's pocket, now.'

Three days later Lord Castleford rode over to Brereton for the last time. He felt dreadfully nervous and husky of voice, so that when he arrived at the front door it was almost a relief to him to hear that Miss Giffard had gone down to the village, as he felt that he would have more time to collect his scattered wits, and to think of something eloquent to say.

He rode down the park, past the gates, and on for a considerable way through the

lanes, encountering near the lodge Mr. Whipple, who was practising the ocarina behind a tall hedge, until he met Mary coming towards him. She was walking very slowly, with weary steps, and Castleford thought, as he looked at her, how changed she was from the girl with laughing eyes and springing step who had taken him and his friends round Brereton Royal some three months ago. She smiled—her usual calm, friendly smile—when she saw him, but no colour came into her cheek, and no light into her large sad eyes. And poor Castleford's heart died within him.

‘I may as well at once,’ he said, in a very hoarse voice, ‘tell you why I came. It was to ask you something. I dare say you may have noticed, may have thought that I—I—liked coming here very much?’ Here he cleared his throat. ‘The fact is, Miss Giffard, that you—that I—never saw anyone at all like you; from the first moment

I set eyes on you I knew you were the sort of woman I should care for ; I have never been really in love till now, in my life. Oh, Miss Giffard, will you *try* and like me ?'

Castleford had never proposed to anyone before, and it must be confessed that he did not do it at all well. But tender-hearted Mary was very much moved.

'Dear Lord Castleford,' she said, and Bobbie thought that he had never heard anywhere such a sweet voice as hers, 'it is too good and kind of you to like me so very much. I do wish, most sincerely, that I could have felt about you as you say you do about me. I think anyone who married you would have a very happy life, for I know how sincere and kind and generous you are. But I can never be your wife ; you must forgive me if I pain you. You will get over it, I am sure, soon, and find someone far more worthy of you than me, who will make you happy.'

Castleford's mouth twitched painfully, almost like that of a child who is about to cry.

'I shan't get over it,' he said, 'not for many years. You are not like any other woman I ever saw. But you must let me be your friend always, won't you? I know you never gave me the smallest hope that I should be anything else; still, when I *know* for a fact that what I thought might be is hopeless, it is very hard to bear.'

They had reached the great gates now, and Mary Giffard paused. Leaning against the ironwork, she fixed her earnest eyes upon his face, and spoke.

'I know you are to be trusted, so I tell you why I never could be your wife. I am engaged to my cousin, Dick Giffard—it was to please Uncle John I said I would marry him; but with all my heart and soul I hope that I may find some loophole of escape from that marriage. For I do not love Dick; I know now that I don't even

like him as a friend, in the way that I like you. But '— here she paused for an instant, and she looked away from Castleford, over the woods, shining scarlet and gold under a bright autumnal sun—'but I love someone else. And I shall never—never, either here or hereafter, care for anyone but him. If he and I should not meet again, I must be his—always.'

The tears shone in Castleford's eyes as he looked at her, and noted the anguish in hers, and in the droop of her mouth. And over her head was the motto of the Giffards standing out clearly defined against the glowing background of red foliage and amber sky, '*Garde la Foy.*'

They were very silent, those two, as they walked towards the house, Castleford leading his pony, and Mary, with the curious far-away expression in her eyes that they so often wore now, slowly pacing beside him. Uncle John came out to meet them.

‘I am extremely sorry we shall lose you so soon, Castleford,’ said he.

‘I shall never forget the happy hours I have spent here, and all your kindness,’ answered the young man. ‘I have been thinking, Mr. Giffard, that I should like to send you one or two additions to the menagerie. My young brother is quartered just now at the Tower, and I’ll tell him to go to Jamrach’s and see what he can find.’

Mary was very much touched at poor Castleford’s thoughtfulness in the midst of his own grief and disappointment. She gave him one of her very sweetest smiles as he wrung her hand at parting, and she watched him until his pony had turned the corner of the avenue and disappeared from sight.

No doubt in years to come Lord Castleford will recover from the blow that he received upon that October afternoon, and

he will marry some bright, charming English girl, who will make his home happy, and prove to be the best of wives. Yet perhaps, even in the far-off future, when his brown wavy hair is streaked with white, and he no longer goes quite so straight across country as he does to-day, he will have now and then a very tender thought—yes, and a little sigh of regret too, sometimes—for the memory of his first love.





CHAPTER XI.

SIR WILLIAM ST. AUBYN was walking slowly by the Serpentine. Chevy had tarried behind him for an instant to prowl suspiciously round a black retriever with an ill-tempered eye.

The Colonel looked tired and haggard, and seemed to take but little interest either in a glorious autumnal sunset of gold and green, or in the earthly attractions of the numerous pretty fur-clad women who passed by him. He suddenly recognised a familiar voice addressing him, and turned round to meet the kindly face of Mr. Stapleton.

‘I had no idea you were in London,’ said St. Aubyn cordially. ‘I am delighted

to see you again.' And he looked inquiringly at the clergyman's companion, a good-looking, over-dressed young man, with a waxed moustache, and a flower in his button-hole.

'This is my friend, Richard Giffard,' said Stapleton. 'I had to come to London on business, but he wants me to combine it with pleasure, and is going to take me to a music-hall this evening. I quite believe it will be my first and last visit to one, but I wish to see what they are like for once.'

'We are going to the Pav.,' said Mr. Dick Giffard solemnly. 'I tell him there's nothing to shock the greatest prig in the world going on there just at present.'

St. Aubyn had started perceptibly upon hearing the young man's name, but the latter was quite unaware that he was being looked at with a kind of contemptuous curiosity. He could not know the Colonel's

feeling of hopeless rage at the idea that his lost love was about to give herself to this second-rate loutish boy. So he doggedly pursued his conversation in the same strain :

‘ There’s a girl there plays the banjo thundering well. Smacks her head with it—dances a breakdown—same time.’

Then he suddenly changed the subject, as the three crossed over the Park in the direction of Stanhope Gate.

‘ You know my uncle and my cousin Mary? Odd old bird, isn’t he? He’s wild at this moment because I’ve cut the army. Well, they’re coming to London directly.’

Sir William set his lips in a rigid expression, and remained silent.

‘ They’ve got some beastly lodgings, but I shan’t see much of them, I don’t think.’

The Colonel lifted his eyebrows.

‘ Well, I’ve got to go and look Mary up, anyhow, soon.’

Mr. Dick Giffard here became very red, and a curious expression, which was anything but that of pleasurable anticipation, came over his face.

‘I should have thought you didn’t require much pressing to go and see *her*?’ said Mr. Stapleton, making an effort to smile.

Dick became still redder and more confused.

‘Ah!’ he said mysteriously, ‘it’s a rum world. Things don’t always go as smooth as you think. Well, I’m off now, Stapleton. Shall expect you to-night at my rooms. And then for the Pav.’

The Colonel looked after the receding figure with a curious expression.

‘He does not seem very much rejoiced at the prospect of meeting his *fiancée*,’ he remarked.

He was longing for a verbal confirmation from the clergyman of a wild hope that was leaping at his heart.

‘I can’t make it out,’ said John sadly. ‘The whole affair puzzles and distresses me. He is dreadfully inferior to—to Miss Giffard, poor boy! And the odd part is that he seems quite unable to appreciate his good luck sometimes, while at others he appears to be a prey to some great anxiety concerning her.’

‘Perhaps — perhaps,’ said Sir William, trying to laugh, ‘he is afraid that she is going to throw him over, after all.’

‘I wish to God she would!’ said the other man, with a sudden earnestness that surprised his companion. ‘It was a terrible mistake letting them be engaged.’

‘She may think so too, now.’

They parted at the corner of Tilney Street, and Sir William walked on, more quickly and restlessly now, with that great hope still surging at his heart.

He did not meet Mr. Richard Giffard again till many days had gone by. During

their course he had anxiously waited every morning for a letter from Mary Giffard. But none ever came, and in his wounded pride he determined that he would not be the first to write to her.

‘Were she free,’ he thought, ‘it is for *her* to tell me so.’

And an almost cruel expression would come into his eyes, soon to give way to one of weary sadness. Mrs. Annesley used to take him to task sometimes for his absence of mind.

‘I am sure I am never preoccupied when I am with *you*,’ he said, in his caressing voice.

‘Oh! but you are; and rather cross, too. I think perhaps you work too hard. Are you coming for a ride with me to-morrow?’

‘Anywhere with you—to the end of the world, if you like,’ he laughed.

‘That’s all right. I shall *never* forgive

you if you have fallen in love, though. I hate men when they are in love.'

'But you surely rarely see them under any other circumstances?'

Here the footman announced a pair of dull country neighbours from Devonshire, and Sir William made his farewells, and went home to accept an invitation to a supper to meet some charming ladies of his acquaintance.





CHAPTER XII.

DURING the first week of November Mr. Giffard and Mary and Potkin had found their time fully occupied in making preparations for their yearly visit to London. It had been arranged this time that Mrs. Giffard should be left at home, and that Mrs. Tonge should come and pay her a long visit, and she appeared perfectly placid and contented at this arrangement.

On a very cold foggy evening, a heavily-laden four - wheeler and a tired horse stopped in front of a lodging - house in Ebury Street, whereupon Potkin, after a violent altercation with the cabman (who had demanded an extra sixpence for 'them

book-boxes'), assisted Mr. Giffard and his niece to descend from their straw-lined vehicle. Mary felt inexpressibly weary as they came into the hall, where a curious combined odour of paraffin-oil and fried fish was very perceptible.

How well she knew it all! The dining-room, with its venerable horse-hair suite, its wire-blinds and its Landseer prints; Mr. Giffard's study, carpeted with oil-cloth and smelling of old tobacco; and the gloomy little drawing-room upstairs, with its dirty crimson furniture, and the woollen anti-macassars, some of which the parting guest usually bore away on his back. The kind landlady, who had an unbounded admiration for Mr. Giffard, and had known Mary from her early childhood, had attempted to brighten up this reception-room by placing some very dusty Pampas-grass in the vases adorned with drooping spangles, and a clean crumb-cloth on the floor. Mary thanked

her for these little attentions with her usual sweet smile, and assured her that it 'was all very nice and comfortable, and that they had everything they wanted,' for she was so utterly tired-out that her only wish was to be left alone, and to be spared questionings of any kind.

On the following day Mr. Giffard, after having lunched off a very pugilistic fowl, to judge by its toughness, and a jelly of almost equal solidity, went off to the British Museum with a large bundle of MSS.

Then Mary started out for a rambling walk through Belgrave Square, and up Grosvenor Place into the Park. She did not see a single face she knew, until, as she was wearily retracing her steps, she noticed Castleford laughing and talking with one or two other men near Apsley House; and a little further on a victoria with very smart cobs and fur-caped servants dashed by, and in it sat a lady with curly golden

hair, whose face seemed familiar to her. She remembered, with a sharp pang, where she had seen it—in a silver frame, once, long ago, at the Grange.

‘We will take a stroll in the Park to-morrow morning,’ said Uncle John, while he was wrestling with a dish of leathery ‘beef olives’ at dinner that evening. ‘It is quite wonderfully mild for November; I dare say we shall see lots of smart people sitting out, and riding, and that will amuse you—no doubt of that. By the way, do you know the Smallpieces have actually arrived in London on a visit to Mrs. Smallpiece’s sister, Mrs. Snell! It is a great treat for them, and a piece of luck for us; for now, when I am at the Museum, I dare say Mrs. Smallpiece will take you about sometimes.’

Mary did not receive this proposal with any expressions of enthusiasm.

On the morrow she and Uncle John

started for the Park, and the pair attracted a good deal of attention as they walked along.

Mr. Giffard was undoubtedly a very handsome, soldierly-looking old man, and Mary, in her simple, well-fitting blue serge, and picturesque hat of the same colour, was uncommonly pleasant to look upon.

The weather was peculiarly bright and soft on this November morning, and when they had passed the Achilles statue they saw that there was already a considerable sprinkling of well-dressed men and women walking up and down, and even sitting in groups upon the chairs.

‘What an awfully pretty girl!’ remarked a young guardsman to a brother-officer as Mary walked past them with her dignified, queenly step, and small chestnut head a little in the air. ‘Who is she? The old boy looks like a distinguished general.’

Mr. and Miss Giffard paid very little

attention either to the admiring glances or laudatory remarks that attended them during their progress down Rotten Row. They had nearly reached the end of this popular walk, when Mary's face suddenly became first crimson, then deadly white. It was just as well that Uncle John noticed neither the change in his niece's colour nor the group of people in the second row of chairs upon whom her eyes had fallen. It consisted of three men and one lady, the latter very beautifully dressed in dark-green velvet and furs, with a becoming arrangement of felt and feathers upon her golden head, and hands encased in the neatest of muffs. Next to her Sir William St. Aubyn was sitting, apparently much entertained by her conversation, for he was laughing very heartily when Mary first caught sight of him ; and the other two men, Lord Leatherhead and Colonel Annesley, looked as if they also thought that the little lady was

extremely good company, to judge by the amused expression upon their faces.

St. Aubyn started perceptibly when he saw Mary. She thought that his face grew flushed as he took his hat off to her, but she could hardly be sure, for almost instantly she had averted her eyes from his face. She felt a dreadful sensation of physical sickness and faintness coming over her, a wild, despairing longing to hear his voice and touch his hand once more, and at the same time almost a dread at the notion of having, perforce, to greet him with the ordinary *banal* and indifferent speech of society.

But he did not rise from his chair. Mary knew instinctively that Mrs. Annesley was inquiring who she was, and then, with swimming head and aching heart, she found herself walking onwards by the side of unconscious, cheerful Uncle John, as if what had passed had been but a dream.

At the end of Rotten Row, Mr. Giffard, to his unbounded satisfaction, encountered an old Bayswater friend of his, Colonel Spooner, whom he had not met for several years, and with him Mrs. Spooner, a rubicund lady in crimson velvet, and Miss Spooner, a young lady in scarlet and green, wearing a marvellous erection in the shape of a hat. There was also Miss Spooner's *fiancé*, a rich young manufacturer from the North ; and then there were no end of handshakings, and exclamations of surprise, and congratulations, and jokes about Miss Spooner ; and all the time Mary stood by, trying faintly to smile and look pleased, and feeling how cold and disagreeable and unsympathetic she was.

Mr. Cheesman, Miss Spooner's *fiancé*, remarked (in a strong North-country accent) to Mr. Giffard, that he 'oonderstood they 'ad it very 'ot in 'Ampshire this last soomer ;' and then came a dissertation on weather and

crops, and agricultural pursuits in general, and Mr. Cheesman announced his intention of taking to farming 'if a certain yoong lady would *consent*' (with side-long glances at the giggling Miss Spooner).

At last Mr. Giffard and Mary bade farewell to their friends, and turned off towards Albert Gate and Ebury Street. Mary felt perfectly certain that Mrs. Annesley and St. Aubyn had been watching this meeting with the party from Bayswater with mingled interest and amusement; but she never turned her head to look back. She thought to herself, very bitterly, that St. Aubyn evidently had not forgiven her, and intended perhaps never even to speak to her again; and then, with a reaction of feeling, she tried to persuade herself that if he could not see her quietly and alone, he would naturally think it better that they should not meet at all. Her head full of these melancholy thoughts and speculations, she started when

a well-known strident voice sounded in her ears:

‘Well, it certainly is an ill-wind that blows nobody good, my dear Mr. Giffard! What luck to meet you and Mary the very first day we are here! Do you know, Mr. Smallpiece and I were going to the Botanical this morning, but he had to be measured for some new trousers, so we were late in starting to catch the “Atlas” ’bus. It goes at eleven fifteen, and it was just exactly eleven twenty-five when we got there. Then I told Mr. Smallpiece to go home and have a rest, and I thought, if I missed the Botanical, I would come and have a look round the Park, for I always say—don’t I, Mr. Giffard?—that a bad shift is better than none.’

‘We had thought of going to the play to-morrow evening,’ said Uncle John in his pleasant courteous manner. ‘And it will give us great pleasure, Mrs. Smallpiece, if

you will join us. I hear there is a most excellent piece at the St. James's.'

'I shall be too delighted!' said the Rector's wife with alacrity. 'I suppose you will have a knife-and-fork tea before you start?'

'We are going to have a little bit of dinner at seven, and please join us at that, and supper afterwards.'

Mrs. Smallpiece was in her very highest spirits, partly perhaps as she had donned the best electric blue poplin and her Sunday sealskin, and had an agreeable sensation of being presentable anywhere.

'I shall be too pleased to chaperon Mary whenever she likes,' said she. 'And so would my sister, Mrs. Joshua Snell. She has got such a beautiful house, Mr. Giffard, and no end of window-flowers, and a barouche and pair, and silver plates to eat off at dinner—think of that! By the way, Mary, you will be so sorry to hear that Mr. Stapleton is

very ill, poor fellow ! Something to do with his lungs, I fear. I don't like his cough. I always say to Mr. Smallpiece that a dry cough is the trumpeter of death. Poor Jane is in a sad way about him. That stupid old Dr. Gregory never came when he was taken ill ; it's always like that in the country, you know : after death the doctor.'

Mary was terribly distressed. Was her last friend, one of the kindest she had ever known, to be taken away too ? Her head, which had begun to ache a little as she left the Park, was throbbing painfully, when Uncle John announced after luncheon his intention of lionizing the Tower that afternoon, and of taking a few notes during his visit there.

'I have an order from the Governor for a special warder, let me tell you,' he observed with dignity. 'It is a chance not to be missed.'

'Couldn't we go another day, Uncle John ?'

asked poor Mary. 'My head aches so dreadfully, and I am really very tired.'

Possibly Mr. Giffard was likewise fatigued ; anyhow, he became decidedly cross.

'I do wish, Mary,' said he, 'that you would occasionally think of somebody besides yourself. Here am I, thinking of *your* pleasure and *your* amusement from morning to night, and you show no gratitude whatever. It's positively disheartening to take you about.'

Mary said nothing. She knew very well that during one particular mood of Uncle John's all forms of argument were worse than useless. So they started off upon their expedition.

'That's a good hansom,' suggested Mary.

Her uncle turned sharply round.

'If you,' said he, 'have more money than you know what to do with, I haven't, let me tell you. We are going by the underground.'

That very stifling mode of progression, as might have been expected, did not improve Mary's headache. She looked so white and weary when they reached Mark Lane that, had Uncle John been in a more amicable frame of mind, he must have felt some compassion for her. But throughout that afternoon's sight-seeing his temper did not show any signs of improvement. It certainly *was* a little ruffling to his dignity when, after having scrambled with some difficulty upon one of the walls within the Tower, he was ignominiously dragged down by a sentry from his post of vantage; but that is no reason why he should have made himself as disagreeable as he undoubtedly did to the 'special warder' who had the honour of conducting him round the various objects of interest.

Nothing that that estimable man could say or do appeared to please Mr. Giffard, who snubbed his stories, contradicted his

statements, and argued upon every trivial point with a persistency that so greatly wearied Mary that she finally left the pair in the midst of an animated discussion, and sought rest and solitude on a bench near the spot where fell, many years ago, the heads of two of the loveliest and shortest-lived of England's queens.

She sat on and on for a long time, watching the ravens and the pigeons, and lost in a train of sad memories. At any other time the beauty and tragic interest of her surroundings would have been simply absorbing to Mary, with her vivid imagination and love of romance ; but to-day her poor little head was too full of the tragedy of her own simple life to give a thought to any story of pain, or heroism, or passion, in the world of long-ago.

On the morrow after this expedition to the Tower, a night's rest and early morning's walk had availed to cure the pain in Mary's

head, if they had failed to rid her of the far greater pain at her heart. That evening she was able to look forward without any feeling of excitement, yet with a certain amount of interest, to the prospect of seeing the play.

The dinner duly despatched, she and her uncle and Mrs. Smallpiece stepped into the very slowest of four-wheelers, in which they drove, or it would be more truthful to say crawled, to the theatre. Mrs. Smallpiece wore, not only the Sunday sealskin, but a mysterious woollen garment, which enveloped her entire head, and a tassel from which was continually bobbing up and down over one eye, and requiring readjustment.

Mary looked very white in her long red plush cloak, and she was so silent that the Rector's wife mentally made a note of the fact, and began speculating as to whether anything else had gone wrong concerning Mr. Dick Giffard.

The curtain had not yet risen when they

arrived, and Mary was wondering whether they had secured good stalls, when she heard her uncle answer with dignity 'Dress circle' to a question addressed to him by an attendant.

'Oh, Uncle John, we have *always* had stalls before !'

Mr. Giffard was not apparently in a much more amiable mood than he had been on the preceding day.

'I suppose, my dear Mary, that what is good enough for Mrs. Smallpiece and myself is good enough for you? If you don't like the places I have taken for you, you are quite at liberty to return home. People can always please themselves,' added Uncle John, after having taken upon this particular occasion every means to prevent his niece from doing anything of the kind.

The stalls were almost empty when Mr. Giffard and the two ladies sat down in their seats in the dress circle. But in one of the front rows Mary recognised Mrs. Annesley,

with her golden hair elaborately curled, and wearing a black dress, which glistened from her shoulders to her feet with masses of jet. Colonel Annesley and another man, and a very pretty, dark, equally well-dressed woman, were with her ; and on her right hand there was a vacant seat.

Poor Mary ! some instinct told her who was coming to fill it. During the first act of the play she found her attention wandering far away from the plot and the actors, excellent though both undoubtedly were, and her eyes glancing every other minute towards the door.

The curtain had just risen for the second act, when she saw St. Aubyn making his way through the people already in the stalls, towards the vacant place. She had felt certain that he *was* coming, and yet when she actually saw him smiling and nodding to the other lady and to Colonel Annesley, as he seated himself by the latter's wife, she

felt so supremely wretched that she could almost have sobbed aloud.

During the four-act play, about which Mary Giffard could afterwards have told very little, she was constantly watching her old lover. How well she knew every turn of his head, every changing expression on his face ! She could hear the very tones of voice that belonged to each. Once or twice in the course of the evening, and during a pathetic love scene, she saw him throw himself back in his chair, and pass his hand over his forehead with an air of utter weariness, and just for those few moments Mary felt ever so little happier.

Did the impassioned actor's words recall to his memory, she wondered, a scene long past, and almost as unreal, perhaps, as any stage picture : a fir wood, and a wild yellow sky, shining bright and clear above

‘Two hearts so madly beating
To mingle and be whole’?

Her face must have looked unutterably sad just then, after the momentary feelings of relief, for it attracted the attention of a young City clerk in the same row of seats. He remarked in a loud whisper to a friend that 'that pretty girl with the military-looking cove, and the old girl with the beads, must have been crossed in love, she looked so uncommon down on her luck.'

The play over, and Mrs. Smallpiece's head having been duly wrapped in its antimacassar, Mary hardly knew whether she most longed for St. Aubyn to recognise and speak to her, or whether she most dreaded being seen by Mrs. Annesley and her companions under the chaperonage of Mrs. Smallpiece. She need not, however, have been afraid of this latter contingency. Mrs. Annesley's smart little cobs and miniature brougham had almost conveyed her and Sir William St. Aubyn to the club, where supper was awaiting them, before Mr. Giffard (who was not

clever at this sort of thing) had chartered the very mustiest of four-wheelers to bring back the two ladies to partake of sandwiches and soda-water at his lodgings in Ebury Street.





CHAPTER XIII.

NOVEMBER was wearing to a close, and neither throughout all its days of fog or sunshine, during all her walks by herself, or with Uncle John, nor at the very few entertainments to which he took her in the evenings, did Mary Giffard ever see St. Aubyn's face again. For a long time she had buoyed herself up with vain hopes that he would find out where they were, and come to see them. But he never came, and now they had only one week more to spend in Ebury Street. Constantly deferred hope had made her heart very sick, and this visit to London—this change which poor Uncle John had fondly hoped would be so

beneficial—had left her cheeks still whiter and thinner than they were when she went away from Brereton.

One morning, when Mary came in from her usual walk—the walk that she scarcely now dared to hope would bring her face to face with her former lover—she found a telegram on the table. The idea suddenly flashed across her that perhaps St. Aubyn had at last discovered their whereabouts, and heard of their approaching departure for the country, and that he was telegraphing to save time, and to announce his arrival. She tore it open with shaking hands. It ran thus :

‘ Napoleon has pip very badly. Lord Clyde suffering from liver. Sending for Bryce. Will wire his opinion. — WAG-HORNE.’

Mary broke into a fit of childish loud laughter, but it was followed by uncontrollable tears.

That night Uncle John started off in high glee for a dinner-party at Colonel Spooner's, and Mary, who had pleaded fatigue, was left alone.

At about nine o'clock, when she was lying on the uncomfortable little sofa, and vainly attempting to read the newspaper, the door opened, and the maid announced, 'Mr. Richard Giffard.'

'Good gracious, Dick, how you startled me! I had not the remotest idea you were in London. Uncle John was dreadfully vexed and disappointed at your going off to Paris just when we arrived, and he will be so sorry you came to-night, when he was dining out.'

'It is precisely because I heard at the door he *was* dining out, that I have looked in here now,' answered the young gentleman, bestowing a very calm, brotherly salute on Mary's cheek as he spoke. 'By the way, I passed your pal, St. Aubyn, this evening,

riding with a thundering smart woman. I made his acquaintance the other day.'

Mary gazed at him inquiringly. She noticed that Dick, somehow or other, looked coarser in appearance than in former days. His face was flushed, and he did not seem quite at his ease.

'I came, my dear old girl,' he resumed, 'to tell you a secret. You are to keep it, do you hear, from Uncle John, anyhow, for the present? And it is a secret that concerns *you*, really, more than anybody else!'

Mr. Dick Giffard here walked up and down the room, and whistled a popular music-hall refrain. Then he sat down, with his back to Mary, and began playing with the fire-irons in a manner that absolutely set her teeth on edge.

'The fact is, my good girl—don't scream when I tell you, because it's done now—that I'm *married*!'

Mary faintly inquired who had had the honour of becoming Mrs. Richard Giffard.

‘Well,’ said Dick, ‘*you* don’t know her, anyhow, except of course by name. You have heard of the Sisters St. Clair? I have married Estelle, the second one, and most people think her a long way the best dancer of the two. I should say she can get her leg higher than any woman I know in London. Of course, Mary, it’s very hard upon you, and all that; but I don’t believe we should really have suited each other a bit—now, should we?’

Mary was too much taken aback at Dick’s news to make a suitable reply. Her first feeling was a wild sensation of joy, which seemed to overflow her whole being, that she was free—free at last to marry the only man she ever could love! Then she reproached herself for her wickedness and selfishness. What would poor old Uncle John, with his pride in his ancestral home

and the spotless lineage of the Giffards, say, when he was introduced to the wife of his heir? Mary shuddered to think of Miss Estelle St. Clair reigning in the grand old house, with its oak staircase and family pictures, and entertaining, possibly, friends of her own stamp on the terrace and the bowling-green. Then with a pang she remembered Mrs. Annesley, and an inward voice seemed to tell her that her freedom had come too late.

‘I can’t expect you to look pleased, of course,’ said Dick. ‘But Estelle and I get on awfully well together, which is the main thing. I may as well let you know, my good girl, that she is below in the growler just now. I’ll run down and bring her up for a moment. Don’t I just wish you could hear her sing, “*Who* was it kissed Elizabeth Jane?”’ And Mr. Richard Giffard hummed two lines of this soul-stirring melody, and executed a few steps of a breakdown.

Mary felt as if she were passing through some foolish and improbable dream. She mechanically noticed that he had left the room and gone down the stairs. Then she became aware that two people were ascending them, and that a female voice was giggling in answer to some remark of Dick's.

The door opened, and a young lady came in with a sort of prancing step. Mary could not help being amused by the proud air of possession that shone on her cousin's face as he walked in behind her. Estelle advanced towards Mary, and extended a hand upon which a varied assortment of bangles jingled. Her face was decidedly a pleasant one, albeit a good deal veiled by white powder, and her short curly hair of a brilliant orange was only partially visible under the feathers of a large hat.

Mary shook hands with kind friendliness.

‘You must forgive me if I seem ungracious and stupid,’ she said. ‘I was a little surprised at Dick’s news. But I hope you and he will always be very happy.’

Apparently it was now Miss Estelle’s turn to be the most taken aback of the two. She had never seen anyone to talk to quite like Miss Giffard before, and she was, moreover, not a little touched at the kindness of her manner.

‘I have often heard of you’ (she did not pronounce her *h*’s very well, by the way) ‘from—my husband. And I hope you will come and see us one of these days. We have got a nice little place near the Regent’s Park.’

Dick looked greatly pleased.

‘You must come and hear her sing too, one night!’ he exclaimed. ‘Give the old man the slip, and I’ll take you to the Pav. She brings the house down;’ and he whistled ‘Elizabeth Jane’ again.

Miss Estelle laughed—a loud stage laugh—and showed in so doing a very beautiful row of white teeth.

Mary felt inclined, weary and sick at heart as she was, to break out herself into hysterical merriment. But she merely made some observation as to the shortness of her stay in London, and Master Dick glanced at the clock.

‘May I just ring for a whisky-and-soda for Stella and me?’ he asked. ‘We’ll have a drink, and hurry home before the old boy is back.’

Mr. and Mrs. Giffard drank the contents of two large tumblers, the lady wiping her lips with a smart lace handkerchief which was strongly perfumed. Then they took their departure, and Mary rubbed her eyes as if she were just awake.

She heaved a deep sigh of thankfulness at the thought that Richard Giffard had now passed away, not only out of the Ebury

Street lodging, but out of her life for ever.

* * * * *

On the evening after Dick's interview with his cousin, it chanced that he again met Sir William St. Aubyn in Hyde Park. Although the latter could not control a raging feeling of dislike towards Mary's betrothed, he nevertheless felt, somehow, compelled to stop and accost him.

After a few unoriginal remarks as to the state of the climate, Dick observed with a cheerful grin :

'I saw my cousin Mary yesterday. She was in first-class form.'

And he looked so perfectly happy and at ease as he made this observation that St. Aubyn turned cold. He noted the marked difference between Dick's present bearing and the constrained manner in which he had alluded to Mary during their last meeting, and the spark of hope that had

been waning for some time in Sir William's breast, but still burnt faintly, died out. He shook hands very coldly with the young man, and left him abruptly. And for some two hours afterwards the few passers-by might have noticed the solitary figure of a tall, middle-aged man, with a haggard face, walking, as in a dream, up and down one of the most deserted walks in Kensington Gardens.

The evening came on, and one by one the lamps grew into little specks of light behind the railings. A few drops of cold rain began to fall, but Sir William did not put up his umbrella. The air was thick and foggy, and the omnibuses and cabs but dimly visible through the yellow mist. But there was a denser gloom in the heart of the lonely man who now had the path entirely to himself. He did not hear the roar of the wheels, the grinding of a barrel-organ, or the discordant voices of

the men shouting 'Special!—spe—cial!' as they ran through the fog with newspapers under their arms. He was listening to a woman's voice singing over and over again :

' Adieu for ever now,
My dear,
Adieu for ever now !'

He was not looking at the black houses, or the gaunt trees, on which a few leaves were still hanging, but at a stately terrace and a bowling-green, bathed in the light of an August moon, and into two sweet eyes that smiled tenderly into his through a mist of tears.





CHAPTER XIV.

ON the departure platform of Waterloo Station, as Mr. Giffard and his niece were directing the movements of Mr. Potkin, and seeing that the book-boxes were duly labelled 'Canford ; with great care,' Mary recognised the figure of an acquaintance. He was a tall man, in a long ulster, about five-and-forty years of age, with a cheerful, eminently British face and small whiskers, and he was accompanied by a man-servant, who, like his master, bore a general appearance of complete respectability and prosperity stamped upon his countenance.

'Hallo, Bevan!' said Uncle John ; 'I had no notion you were to be back so soon.'

‘Well, you see, as St. Aubyn would go off in the provoking way he did, I thought I might as well get the benefit of the shooting myself. I hear there’s a tremendous lot of game this year. I have hurried home as fast as I could lay legs to the ground. And how are you, Miss Mary? You don’t look anything like as fit as you did when I saw you last.’

Mr. Bevan carried himself and his luxurious fur rug, and his society papers, into the same railway compartment which Mr. Giffard and his niece had elected to occupy, and he conversed cheerfully, and almost without cessation, throughout the entire journey to Canford.

‘I saw old Bill in London last night, and tried to persuade him to run down on a visit. But he was obdurate, and said he couldn’t get away until he goes with the Annesleys to Monte Carlo next week. By the way, I had a letter from Miss Stapleton.

saying her brother is very ill. I am quite cut up about it. He is the best of fellows, and the best of parsons. I am afraid, if the worst happens, she won't have a sixpence, poor soul!

At the mention of St. Aubyn's name, Mary Giffard had raised her eyes from her novel, but she made no remark.

'You'll come over to the Grange as soon as you can, Miss Mary, won't you?' said Bevan, as he helped Mr. Giffard to descend from the train.

Then he lit a cigar, and drove off in his very well-appointed brougham, over the frosty roads which led to his house. Mrs. Giffard was downstairs awaiting her husband and niece.

'You must have some tea,' she said. 'There is no doubt tea is very warming. And I was to tell you, John, from Waghorne, that Napoleon has pulled round wonderfully, and that Lord Castleford's brother has sent

you a young hyena from Jamrach's. He bit the porter at Canford, but Waghorne gave him (the porter, I mean) eighteenpence, so I suppose it's all right.'

After this, for her, very lengthy speech, Mrs. Giffard relapsed into silence for the remainder of the evening.

On the following day Mary awoke to find the window-frames edged with snow, the clipped yews capped with white, and the sky throughout of a monotonous light gray. She shivered as she closed her little casement, and after she was dressed and had breakfasted, wrapped herself in furs, and went off to buy a few groceries and small luxuries for some of her village friends.

It was snowing hard when she returned, but the air and exercise had done her good, and there was a little colour in the cheeks which had grown so drawn and thin.

Jane Stapleton was in the library, an anxious look in her eyes, the rims of which were very red.

‘John is much worse to-day,’ she said. ‘Mr. Bevan has been more than kind, and has insisted on sending for Dr. Mordaunt from Reading’—here her voice broke a little—‘but he cannot do much. You see, he caught a bad chill when he came back from London, and it has settled on both lungs. He would go and see Blake, the poacher, when the old man was dying, on a bitter night, though he was not fit himself to stir from the house ;’ and two tears fell upon Jane Stapleton’s shabby fur muff.

Mary kissed her very affectionately.

‘I can’t say in any words what I feel,’ she murmured. ‘From the way in which I value his friendship, I can guess a little what he is to you. I never saw anybody so good. I always feel the better for it if I only meet him for five minutes.’

The two friends sat on a little while together over the fire. It was not long before Jane almost forgot her own suffering in noticing the change in Mary Giffard. There was a hopeless look in her eyes that she had never seen there before. But from her there was no bitterness of speech, no talk about the cruel disillusion of life; on the contrary, she seemed to throw herself with even greater zest than before into the interests of her friend. And this touched Jane very deeply—so much so that she almost broke through the veil of reserve that usually wrapped her round, and hinted at a sorrow of her own, apart from her grief at her brother's condition.

‘It is idiotic of me, at my age,’ said Jane Stapleton, ‘to expect any great happiness. And yet sometimes—it is difficult not to hope a little—I must seem very foolish to you, Mary dear, a plain, elderly woman, still dreaming of romance! But even if it all

comes to nothing, perhaps it is better to have had only the dream !'

'I know who you mean, and I don't see why it is foolish. Oh, Jane, if I could see you as happy as you deserve to be, it would make my own life ever so much brighter ! May I come some day soon and see your brother ?'

Potkin opened the door and announced 'Mr. Bevan.' And poor Jane Stapleton's cheeks became suddenly all aflame.

He came in, with a graver expression than usual on his face, and sat down by the two ladies, warming his hands over the fire.

'I met Mordaunt,' he said, 'and I know he will do all he can. Dear Miss Stapleton, you must try and keep up a good heart. I can't let you walk home in this snow, by the way. Take my brougham, and send it back for me, and I'll have a chat with Miss Mary. I know John 'll want you. I

am coming over this afternoon myself to see how he is, and to have tea with you, if I may ?'

The fire had certainly affected Miss Stapleton's face after her tramp through the cold air.

She was so flushed now that she was thankful to escape into the carriage out of sight of Mr. Bevan's eyes. The latter remained a little while with Mary. They talked much of John Stapleton, of his saintly life, his large heart and sympathies, of Jane and her love for him, of the poverty and self-denial of the brother and sister. Then suddenly Arthur Bevan said :

'I had a letter from Bill St. Aubyn to-day, from Nice. He is with my cousin, Nora Annesley and her husband, and Charlie Vernon.'

Poor Mary clenched her hands tightly together, and looked at the silvery logs in the grate.

‘They are having a festive time,’ pursued Arthur: ‘plays, and dinners, and balls. Bill is wonderful for his age, in the way he larks about and enjoys things.’

And Mr. Bevan opened a sheet of foreign paper, looked down a page, and laughed half aloud.

‘I am afraid I can’t quite read you a story he tells me here,’ he said. ‘But it is *too* funny. Certainly the French have a delicious way of putting things!’ and he laughed again.

Mary felt a cold feeling of sickness stealing over her. The sense of the bitter contrasts of life almost overpowered her. After all, what did anything seem to matter?

Tears and pain and death and parting one day—laughter and ribald jokes and callous indifference the next. It was only like the shifting scenes in a play. And very soon the curtain would fall, and it would signify

to no one that a heart more or less had been broken in a drama that would soon be quite out of date and forgotten.

Mary had still another visitor that morning, in the shape of Mrs. Smallpiece.

‘I have left my goloshes and my cloud in the hall,’ said that lady, as she bustled in. ‘Seasonable weather, isn’t it, Mary, my dear? Quite a white world. Will you just brush the snow off my sealskin? I have made Mr. Smallpiece begin his woollen combinations to-day. Isn’t it sad about poor John Stapleton? We must have prayers put up for him next Sunday. Have you got your Christmas cards yet? I am afraid I’ve got a light purse to buy them with this year, what with the boiler bursting, and the pipes, in the frost: it’s hard work, too, to get any cooking done. The “Martha’s pudding” last night was burnt to a cinder! Really, these servant girls are dreadful! I always tell them, “Remember,

idleness is the devil's bolster!" but it's no use.'

And Mrs. Smallpiece snapped her jaws and paused for breath. After a moment she continued :

'I wish poor John Stapleton would have worn Jaeger's! There's nothing like them. . . . I saw Jane just now in Mr. Bevan's brougham. She looks so queer, and flushed, and feverish. We shall have her breaking up too soon.'

And Mrs. Smallpiece took out her knitting and sat down by the fire. Mary's heart sank. She longed wildly to go away into the solitude of her own room, to cry her heart out, to pray despairing, passionate prayers for the man who she thought no longer loved her. But she sat quite still, and appeared to be listening to the Rector's wife.

'I saw the Tonges yesterday. They were driving past the sign-post, and I was

at the gate, and I said, "Do come in!" So they did, and they had a glass of dandelion-wine and a sally-lunn each, and Mr. Tonge said how shocked, but *not* surprised he was about what he heard of Sir William St. Aubyn.'

Mary threw herself back in her chair with a gesture of impotent anger.

'I perfectly loathe Mr. Tonge and his scandals,' she said. 'But he knows that you enjoy them, though every Sunday you both say, "From all uncharitableness, good Lord, deliver us!"'

'Gracious me, Mary, how you fire up! Of course, it's only natural one should be interested in an old neighbour, however much we may all disapprove of him. Mr. Tonge has a cousin at Nice now, and she says——'

'I will *not* hear a word more about Sir William!' And Mary's thin cheeks grew perfectly scarlet. 'Whatever he may do

is no concern of yours or of mine. I only know that both you and Mr. Tonge were pleased enough to meet him, and to make up to him when he *was* here.'

Mary Giffard had never before been so grateful to her aunt as she was now, when she saw her coming into the library. She went straight off to her own little oak room, and for an hour or more sobbed as if her heart would break.

And the dreary winter days went on, with their alternations of snow and slush, east winds and cold rain. And one evening John Stapleton passed away out of them—who that knew him could doubt it?—into unending peace and light.

He had loved Mary Giffard with the loyalty of a great nature, but she had never known it.

And Jane wondered, as she sat alone in her deserted room, if in some future state of being he would tell her? She felt that

she could not wish him back again in the midst of the struggle and the sacrifice.

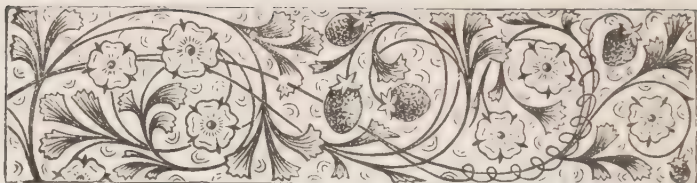
Mary mourned very sincerely for her friend, but somehow or other, after all the tortures that she had been through, one sorrow more or less did not seem to affect the whole tenor of her life. She was more patient and calm than she had been a few months ago, and there were moments still, now and then, when a wild feeling of hope made her heart beat. What if, after all, things should come right one day, 'after long grief and pain'?

She would shut her eyes, and try to fancy that her lover's arms were round her, that she was close against his heart once more. And she would almost smile at the ecstasy of her dream.

'I am better off than many,' she thought. 'He did care for me once, very dearly, and

that is something that no one can ever take away from me. I was the woman he loved best, for a little while, a little while ; and I thank God for that every day.'





CHAPTER XV.

SOME weeks after her brother's death, Jane Stapleton was walking slowly from Canford village to the lonely Vicarage-house, which was soon to be her home no longer, when she was greeted by Mr. Bevan, who was driving himself in his smart dogcart, and who was armed with a supply of light literature from the railway station. When he recognised her he got down, threw the reins to the groom, and said that he would also walk back, and he and Jane went on together to her sad little home. He noticed how worn she looked, and how red and swollen her eyelids were, betraying many

tears, and nights of sorrow and wakefulness. She was plainly, even shabbily dressed, in dyed black clothes that already looked almost rusty, and he observed that she wore darned thread gloves on her thin fingers. His whole heart was filled with a great pity for this lonely woman, who had lost the last tie that bound her to earth, and who was about to start forth to make her way as best she could in a world which shows itself so callous to those who cannot help themselves. He had always thoroughly liked Jane Stapleton, and admired her practical good sense, her charming voice, and her frank, pleasant manners. Indeed, once or twice, on the few festive occasions at which they had met, when Jane had looked her best, and taken her full share in the entertainment of her neighbours, he had even caught himself thinking, 'she would really be a good-looking woman if she were decently dressed,' and picturing to himself how the

Bevan tiara of diamonds would appear upon her braids of fair hair.

‘I want to send you some flowers,’ said Bevan very kindly to Miss Stapleton, ‘for dear John’s grave. I have told the gardener to get me all the white ones he can out of the greenhouse ; and, dear Miss Stapleton, you *must* let me, please, put up a memorial to one of the best friends I have ever had. Would you like a monument, or a window, or both ?’

Jane’s eyes filled with tears.

‘You are too, too kind to me, Mr. Bevan. Whatever you think best will please me. Won’t you come into the Vicarage now, and have some tea to warm you ?’

He followed her into the cheerless, bare room, where the fire had burnt out, and only white ashes strewed the hearth. John Stapleton’s books were lying, just as he had left them, upon the tables, and a photograph of Mary Giffard, as a little child, was

by the blotting-book where he had written his daily letters. The room was dreadfully cold, and the silence and desolation of the house struck a still deeper chill into Bevan's heart. Jane brought in some tea herself on a tray, and her fingers looked blue and frozen as she poured it out for him.

Suddenly Bevan spoke, in an altered voice, which startled her extremely.

‘Miss Stapleton, I have something to say to you, something to ask. You and I are neither of us any longer very young, and I dare say we have lived out some of our old feelings of romance, and many of the joys of youth; but I cannot help thinking that there might yet be much of real, quiet, lasting happiness for you and for me, Jane, if we spent the remainder of our lives together. Will you be my wife?’

It was rather a prosaic proposal, but it touched poor Jane Stapleton very deeply.

And when she said ‘Yes’ to the offer

it was certainly more of the kindness and sympathy and generosity of the man who made it that she thought, than of the numberless worldly advantages which would accrue to her from the acceptance of it.

Arthur Bevan walked home that evening in a state of great cheerfulness and satisfaction, and charity towards all mankind. On his arrival he found a telegram upon the hall table, and tore it hurriedly open. The first glance sent a cold shiver through his frame, and the exclamation 'Good God!' escaped him as he read it. It came from San Remo, and was signed 'Annesley.' The words it contained were as follows: 'Terrible accident. St. Aubyn and dear Maud out driving; horses fell over precipice. She never spoke again. Bill alive; severe internal and spine injuries.'

* * * * *

Mary Giffard was sitting in the library that same evening reading one of her best

beloved novels (namely, Henry Kingsley's 'Ravenshoe'), when the door opened slowly to admit Cornelius, whose boots had again taken to creaking loudly. The page-boy was suffering from toothache, and his face was very much swelled up on one side, so Mrs. Pinion had made him a picturesque head-dress, composed of a bread poultice and scarlet handkerchief. At any other time his remarkably grotesque appearance would have excited in Mary mingled feelings of compassion and amusement, but to-day her nerves were in rather an irritable condition, and it merely provoked her.

Cornelius spoke in a very stuffy, slow, important voice.

'Please, Miss Mary,' said he, 'Sir William St. Hawbin's 'ad an 'orrible haccident. Mr. Bevan's coachman's 'ere and 'e says so. There was a lady with 'im as is killed.'

When the answer came, it did not sound like Mary Giffard's voice that spoke.

‘ Did he give no—no particulars ?’

‘ No, miss, ’e didn’t give no particklers. I can run down and see if ’e’s gone, miss.’

At this moment there was a tremendously loud ring at the front-door bell, and the next Arthur Bevan rushed into the room. One glance at his pale, scared face gave the death-blow to Mary Giffard’s last hope. All the blood came surging to her brain, and she felt as though someone had struck her a stinging blow between the eyes. Her lips moved, but for a few minutes not a word would come. At last Arthur Bevan divined that she was saying, ‘ Is he—is he—dead ?’

He put his strong arm round her to support her, and made her sit down again in the chair from which she had just risen.

‘ No,’ he answered, the muscles of his face working painfully as he struggled to keep back his tears ; ‘ thank God, he’s not dead. But, dear Miss Mary, I own I fear the very worst. The telegram sounds as

bad as can be. It seems the horses fell over a precipice—took fright, I suppose; the carriage must have been caught by something, otherwise they would all have been dashed to pieces; but my poor little cousin, Maud Annesley, she's dead; and I can't imagine what'll become of Jack, her husband: he worshipped her. And it breaks my heart to think of Bill.'

'Are you going to—*him*?' asked Mary Giffard.

'Yes, yes,' answered Mr. Bevan, 'of course. I am going to catch the train to-night for London, and shall be with him to-morrow. Poor old Bill! please God I shall find him alive. Dear Miss Mary, you will forgive me for hurrying off now, at once, for I *must* catch this train? I didn't want you to see the news in the papers. I knew you and Bill were friends. Make my excuses to Mr. Giffard; and before she could answer, Mr. Bevan was out of the room,

down the stairs, and in his dogcart, driving like the wind to Canford Station.

‘ I knew you and Bill were friends ! ’ The words kept on echoing over and over in her ears. *Friends !* and she had lost her head, and sent no message, no word of sympathy, no sign that she still cared for him. She ran to the writing-table, and with dry eyes wrote on a scrap of paper these lines :

‘ I hardly know what I write. My heart, that still belongs to you, as it did, I think, always, is broken. Though we have never met since the day you bade me good-bye, that dreadful morning—do you remember it ? —the mere knowledge that you were alive, that I might some day meet you, and know that you have forgiven me, has enabled me to struggle on during all these weary months of despair. Oh ! if you are to be taken away now, what will become of me ? And you have said no word ! It is agony to

me to think of you in pain, and that I cannot be near you, cannot wear out my life in waiting upon you, and trying to comfort you in your sufferings. I hardly know what to write. I think I am going mad. Forgive me for any pain I ever gave you. I love you! I love you!

‘MARY GIFFARD.’

She thrust the letter into an envelope, stamped it, and rang the bell.

‘Cornelius, will it hurt you to go out? The letters have gone from the house, but I do *so particularly* want this one to catch the post! I will give you a sovereign if you will run now, directly, as hard as you can, to the office.’

Cornelius smiled blandly at the mention of the promised remuneration, and went out with the letter. But as ill-luck would have it, on his entrance to the village he met a friend who informed him with great glee

that there was a fire in Brereton, and an 'ingin a-comin', and miss this scene of excitement he simply could not.

When he arrived, twenty-five minutes afterwards, at the office, he found that the postman had already been and gone; but nevertheless he cheerfully dropped Mary's epistle into the box, and went back to claim his sovereign. And so, owing to the Brereton fire, and to the disobedience of Cornelius the page, it came about that Mary Giffard's letter arrived at San Remo some fifteen hours too late.





CHAPTER XVI.

To Mary Giffard the next two days passed like an evil dream. She seemed to have lost all consciousness of her surroundings, and to be existing for one thing only : namely, the advent of some word, some message, from him whom she had loved and lost. Jane Stapleton almost forgot her own prospects of future happiness, so absorbed was she in sympathy for her friend, and the first glance at Mary's face had told her more than any speech would have done, for her story was written in the agonized expression of her eyes and the pathetic curves of her mouth. Little by little Jane heard more of what had passed between St. Aubyn

and the broken-hearted girl to whom he had bidden so cruel a farewell; and she filled up other details from her own imagination, and her knowledge of the character of these two people, for whom the sunshine of love had been swallowed up in so dark a night.

At this time Mary found that the society of Jane Stapleton was more congenial to her than that of any other person, and had therefore asked her to come and stay at Brereton; so it happened that the two were together one evening on the platform of Canford Station, waiting for the train that should bring the evening newspapers down from London.

There was, of course, some delay, while they were being sorted and folded, but Jane finally secured a *Globe*, and she and Mary were outside the white gates before either of them found courage to open it. The morning's bulletin from Bevan had not been calculated to relieve their anxiety, for it was

worded, 'No improvement—usually unconscious,' and the letter which he had written to Jane on the night of his arrival at San Remo had wrung Mary Giffard's heart as she read it, and had guessed how slight was Arthur's hope of his friend's ultimate recovery.

The two women stood still in the bare wintry road, the snowflakes falling lightly on their heads, and the melancholy whistling of a north-east wind, blent with the distant scream of an engine, echoing in their ears.

Jane Stapleton's lips were tightly compressed, and her face very colourless, as she unfolded the newspaper. Some instinct told her what she would read within it, and no less certainly did Mary Giffard divine upon what words, so harsh and cruel in their brevity, their eyes would fall. Tearless and silent they read the following short paragraph :

'We regret to announce the death (which

took place this morning, at San Remo, from the effects of a carriage accident) of Colonel the Honourable Sir William St. Aubyn, K.C.B. The lamented officer was the fourth son of the third Viscount St. Aubyn, and had distinguished himself by his conspicuous gallantry on foreign service upon several occasions.' Here followed the date of his birth, and some account of his war services. So it befell that on that bitter winter evening, when the snow lay white upon the ground, and the wind sighed and moaned through tree and rafter, Mary Giffard's heart died, and that in the book of Fate 'the end' was written, at the close of her life's story.

Through the dark days and darker nights to come, when she lay awake with wide-open aching eyes, and a burning pain across her forehead, she felt as if her mind must become unhinged by the agony that wrung every nerve.

We many of us are accustomed to say that there are evils worse than Death, until his cold hand is actually laid upon the one being whose life was a part of our own. Then through the silence and darkness we stretch out despairing arms into the Great Perhaps, the dim uncertainty, the void of hopelessness. While there was but a half-chance of our eyes meeting those poor glazed eyes, while our hands might yet touch those stiff waxen ones in the mere conventional grasp of acquaintanceship, we felt that the lost one was in some sense ours still. Could we not sooner forgive treachery and ingratitude than this awful unresponsiveness? Why tell us in these moments of agony of a glorified form, and of a larger insight into the follies and ills that made us drift apart on earth? We only long madly, with a bitter revolt at the inexorable, as of a trapped and imprisoned dumb creature, for one short hour of converse, not with a pure, disem-

bodied spirit, but with our frail friend of flesh and blood, whose every fault would be forgiven would he but come back to know it!

A few days afterwards Arthur Bevan returned to the Grange and went over to call upon Mary. She scarcely showed any sign of emotion when she saw him, and he was beyond measure astonished by the calmness and directness of the questions which she asked him. He had an Englishman's natural dread and horror of anything approaching to a 'scene,' yet he was almost as much distressed by this unnatural tranquillity. From Jane he had already learnt what had been her feelings regarding his friend, and many things, such as St. Aubyn's sudden departure and refusal to return, had now become clear to him. He guessed, moreover, that there must have been something approaching to a quarrel before the last parting, and his kind heart bled for the

despairing girl, wounded to the death, and yet bearing such a brave front before the outside world.

Just as he was leaving her he paused.

‘Miss Mary,’ he said, ‘what I have to say is difficult. Forgive me if I do not word it well. I have a fancy—I may be utterly wrong, but yet I *have* thought—that you may have misunderstood the nature of the friendship between Bill and my poor cousin, Mrs. Annesley. There was indeed the most sincere and cordial affection existing between them, but she knew him too well to imagine (even supposing that she had been in love with him, which she was not, I think) that his heart could ever be given to her. I fancy that she suspected, what I *know* to be the case, that it belonged to another woman. . . . He was unconscious, you see, most of the time, but just before the last I saw him trying to speak, and I thought he said, “Tell her—Mary—have

written." . . . I could not catch the rest. One thing more—Will you give poor Chevy a home? Bill's servant tells me he is fretting dreadfully for his master!

And hardly waiting for an answer, Mr. Bevan wrung her hand, and was gone.

A week later St. Aubyn's soldier-servant conveyed Chevy to Brereton. Mary was in the library when she heard the well-known bark on the stairs, and a scuffling of feet as the dog scrambled up them, followed by the heavy tread of a man. A sickening pain went through her heart as it flashed across her that the *one* hand she longed to hold in hers would not open the oak doors; that the *one* step she would have given years of life to hear for a second only would never come up the staircase of Brereton Royal again. Chevy bounded in, with something of his old playfulness, as he recognised both her and the room that he had once known so well. And though

during many days she had shed no tears, regardless of the presence of the soldier-servant (who was standing 'at attention' in the doorway), Mary now buried her face in the dog's golden ruff, and sobbed like a little child.

'He's fretted a deal, has Chev,' said the soldier mechanically (and looking as if he himself was much afraid of breaking down also); 'but he'll be all right with you, miss; he remembers you well, he does.'

And Chevy sat down close to Mary's chair, and rested his beautiful head upon her lap, as if he wished to give his cordial assent to these last words.

The man produced a sealed letter from his pocket, and handed it to Mary.

'I was to give you this, miss, from Mr. Bevan. He found it in Sir William's blotting-book when he was sorting the things.'

She took the letter, and the man, with

a military salute and a parting caress to the dog, left the room.

‘Come up, Chev, with me. I must be alone, but *you* can come.’

And grasping the letter, which was in an envelope addressed to her in Bevan’s handwriting, Mary Giffard mounted the stairs and sought the solitude of her own room before breaking the seal. A sight of the blurred handwriting inside caused a spasm of pain to pass over her face. It was an unfinished letter, evidently, for there was no signature. It ran thus :

‘You will have heard of my very bad accident, and perhaps when this reaches you all my suffering will be over. I know you will grieve, for you, with your tender heart, always felt sorrow for the pain of the merest stranger ; and we—well, we were more than friends once, were we not—long ago ?

‘ It seems to me as if years, not months, had passed since I said good-bye to you, darling ; and ever since then, not a day, scarcely an hour, has passed without your being present to my thoughts. Oh ! how I have longed to hold your dear little hand in mine just once more, and to hear you say you forgave me, for all the fault was mine. *You* were right all along, but I would not see it, and was cruel and unjust to you. Do you remember that day in London when you passed by me ? I realized then that I loved you more madly than of old ; that my love would not be extinguished until I was lying asleep under the green turf for ever. Yet I thought, too, and perhaps I was right, that *you* would never change your resolution ; that the renewal of our friendship, our love, would mean fresh agony to me, fresh pain, perhaps, to you. So I did not go and speak to you, earnestly as I longed to hear your voice once more.

I think, as I lie here, so often, dear, of your song, the song you sang that night when I first knew that I loved you.

“Hard fate will not allow, allow” (you remember how the words go): “I love you ever and all, ever and all.” This is my last message to you. I am very tired, but I must say one word more. Don’t think that it is altogether in vain that we have met. Though to me has not been awarded the infinite joy of having your hand in mine, to lead me down the rough paths of life, and your smile to shine into my eyes, yet you *have* given me much happiness—happiness of the best kind— and made me, perhaps, ever so little more self-forgetful, more hopeful of some better state of existence, some bright far-off future—for you and for me—otherwhere. If we should meet then, shall I hear once more your sweet voice, and know that I am forgiven? and shall we. . . .’

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The pale December moon was shining into the little room when Jane Stapleton, after knocking, unanswered, many times, opened the door and entered.

Her eyes fell upon Mary Giffard lying white and senseless upon the oak floor, with a dead man's letter tightly clenched in her rigid, cold hand.





CHAPTER XVII.

*Fragment of a letter from Mrs. Bevan to
Arthur Bevan, Esq.*

‘ You tell me, dearest Arthur, to write you a long account of all I am doing at the Grange, and of our many old friends. I confess I hardly know where to begin! I have so much to say. I could write you a ream of foolscap if you had patience to read it. But first of all I must tell you what an unbounded delight it is to me to be here, in my beautiful home! When you come back too, next month, from your long Nile journey, what shall I have to wish for more? I feel so deeply sorry that my tiresome ill-

health should have made you lose so many—actually four whole winters in this dear place! But you must not let the house again; I am so strong and robust now that, after my walk to Canford and back this morning, I hardly felt tired.

‘ Dear John’s grave was a mass of flowers; his old parishioners have not forgotten him, and your window is quite beautiful. I am so glad you chose for its subject the “Son of Consolation,” for does not that sentence describe him too? Well, I have been over to Brereton and heard a very great piece of news! You will never guess what it is! You knew, of course, that Dick Giffard lost his wife nearly two years ago? Poor thing! I believe she was not a bad sort of woman, but it would have been sad beyond words to think of her reigning at Brereton; and now this young man is engaged to be married to a charming, well-educated lady from Manchester, and a great heiress as well

(Miss Spyer by name). And she will have enough money to fill the stables, and restore the house, in fact, to all its old prosperity and grandeur ; and Master Dick will settle down, I have no doubt, into a humdrum country squire. Dear old "Uncle John" is so happy about this news, that it has done much to pull him round after a very bad attack which he had the other day. But he is considerably aged, and gets very tired, and rather cross, poor old man ! over his writing. I think he felt Mrs. Giffard's death a good deal, though she certainly was not much in the way of a companion. Oh, I mustn't forget Mrs. Smallpiece. They have got a new curate, and she doesn't like him *at all*. I ventured mildly to suggest that he might possibly improve on acquaintance. "Oh yes," said she, "like bad fish in July, no doubt !" which is hardly encouraging for the curate.

‘Mr. and Mrs. Tonge are extremely

flourishing, and have been on a visit to Lord and Lady Wakefield, which has made him very happy, and quite amicable, for the time being, to Mrs. Tonge.

‘And Mary? I know that it is about her that you have been longing to hear all this time, but I have kept what I have to say of her for the last, because it makes me so sad, I could not write cheerfully afterwards. Well, I don’t know that she seems very different at *first sight*, and of course her plain black dress would naturally make her appear rather whiter and thinner; but when you look closely at her, and watch her face when she is not speaking, I think one *does* notice a great alteration. She still smiles her old smile, and even laughs merrily sometimes, and busies herself as she did formerly among her village people, and with Uncle John’s writings; but there are quite marked lines round her mouth now, and on her forehead; and when she is silent

the far-away, hopelessly sad expression in those lovely eyes cuts me to the heart, and often haunts me for long afterwards. I met her this morning out walking with Chevy (who has grown quite fat and sober, and looks very happy), and she went some way with me down the lane. She told me how delighted she is about Dick and his *fiancée*, and then she added, "Some day, Jane, when dear Uncle John wants me no longer, I am going away to London to build and endow an accident-ward in a hospital to *his* memory. It will be such a great interest to me, and it makes me very happy to think it will be done for him." And I knew she meant William St. Aubyn. We have not spoken of him again. Oh, Arthur, how we rack our brains pondering and speculating over the mysterious enigmas of life! How could Mary Giffard, with her sweet pure soul, her tender heart, her courage and her patience, have required such a

terrible discipline? Do her prayers, perhaps—prayers of a martyr and a saint, for such she is—avail the more now for the man whom she so deeply loved? or is it that *he* has “much to learn, much to forget,” ere he can in any measure be worthy of a nature like hers? Who shall say?

“The hour which might have been, yet might not be,
Which man's and woman's heart conceived and bore,
Yet whereof life was barren—on what shore
Bides it the breaking of 'Time's weary sea?'”

THE END.

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